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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
April 10, 2011
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45
“Lent and Lazarus’s Resurrection”

The scripture readings today are drawn from the lectionary and like last week they are long. I’ve tried to keep my sermon short to compensate for their length.

The gospel story is best understood as metaphor. It doesn’t have to be literally true to communicate the richness and power of God and it’s no coincidence that the accompanying story is the famous dry bones passage from Ezekiel which no one takes literally.

So what do we make of the incredible Lazarus story?

First, it comes in the midst of our Lenten journey to the cross and resurrection. In a way Lazarus’s death and resurrection foreshadows Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Audrey West, professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago writes in *Feasting on the Word*: “Moved by Mary’s weeping (in the Lazarus story), Jesus asks, ‘Where have you laid him?’ Ordering the stone to be taken away from the tomb he cries out in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’, and the man who has been dead for four days comes forth from the darkness. In a sign of God’s glory, death is overcome. However, the burial clothes that bind Lazarus’s hands and feet and cover his face are a vivid reminder that death still clings to him.

“On another day, another Mary, weeping at another tomb, asks the same question: ‘Tell me where you have laid him.’ On that day, the burial clothes will be left behind in the tomb – the facecloth rolled up in a place by itself – no longer required for the one whom God has raised. On that day, the disciples will see a sign even greater than the raising of Lazarus. Here, at the tomb of Lazarus, death is denied for a time. There, at the tomb of Jesus, death is overcome for good.”

We will have a full blown expression of Jesus’ resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Veronice Miles, a teacher at Wake Forest University School of Divinity in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, spins beautifully around the metaphors in the Lazarus story.

She writes in *Feasting on the Word* that “resurrection and life are central to the meaning that we make for our lives, informing our sense of Christian vocation. In this respect, resurrection confronts us as an urgent call, beckoning us to consider the possibility that those whom our world deems socially, physically, spiritually and emotionally dead might live into a new reality.”

Who are the socially dead in our world? In one sense it's in those going through the motions of life – not really feeling life and energy in what they are doing. One's work life or marriage could go that way. Life happens when we feel called to whatever we are doing. A classic theory states that alienation happens when one is divorced from the product of one's labor. There is much that pulls us away from life. Jesus calls people from the tomb of social death.

Lazarus's death points to the physically dead in our world. Who are the physically dead? The word "physically" is in inverted commas since no-one living is physically dead. What might constitute the "physically" dead are the abandoned in institutions and homes and who give up on life, and that's why it is always good to see life and activity in nursing homes like that in Creekwood where Klara Larsen lives. The activities director beautifully and creatively engages the residents. Jesus calls people from the tomb of physical death.

Lazarus's death points to the spiritually dead in our world. Who are the spiritually dead? When we lose our sense of awe and wonder we are at risk. "The glory of God is a human being fully alive" says Irenaeus, of spiritual vitality. A professor of psychology at UC Davis, Robert Emmons, spoke on "gratitude" at SFTS last week. He said gratitude, an aspect of grace and therefore of the spirit, was dead when there was a loss of God and divine moral law, loss of contact with the natural world, loss of a sense of place and loss of the past. Gratitude is life. Jesus calls people from the tomb of spiritual death.

Lazarus's death points to the emotionally dead in our world. Who are the emotionally dead? One sees this in law courts where the killer, abuser, thief or robber has no remorse. Compassion is regarded so highly in spiritual circles because it feels *with* others in their pain and sorrow. The emotionally dead divorce their head from their hearts. Unfortunately, wars often take the caring heart out of combatants. They do this to survive. It's hard to get the heart back as many war veterans will tell you. Jesus calls people from the tomb of emotional death.

Miles writes: "We pray for the power of resurrection in the lives of persons and communities bound by the grave clothes of war, genocide, poverty, disease, dis-ease, systematic abuse and systemic oppression."

She continues: "Releasing persons and communities from the clutches of death also demands something of us, as did Lazarus's resurrection of his community. Though Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, he urged those who were alive and well, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

"Resurrected men, women, and children today also require caring communities that are willing to nurture and strengthen them until they are able to walk alone; to remove the grave clothes of self-doubt, social isolation, marginalization, and oppression; to tear away the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss, and grief, so that unbound women, men, and children might walk in dignity and become creative agents in the world."

The church, our church, is a place where everyone in our pews and pulpit has experienced death in some way. We might be experiencing some form of death now in ourselves, others and the world. In the resurrection of Lazarus we see God at work in Christ. We become an unbinding, life-affirming community. We look to Jesus' death on the cross and we see beyond his death to his resurrection. We become a death-denying and life-affirming community. The bottom-line is resurrection and life – even in Lent. Amen.