

Rising from the Grave

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, March 9, 2008.

Five hundred years before Jesus is born, the army of the great Babylonian Empire aims its sights at the little kingdom of Judah. In the capital city Jerusalem, the people put up a valiant fight but could not stop the invasion. Following the brutal policy of the time, the Babylonian army takes the surviving inhabitants, including a man named Ezekiel, and deports them to Babylonia where they will not be a threat to the Empire. As the people make the long despairing trek to the land of their conquerors, the Temple rises up in flames and their city is reduced to rubble behind them. On their way, they pass the bones of those who had fought the Babylonians and perished in battle. In this dismal context, the people face a crisis of belief. The story that had formed them as a people is the story of the Exodus, when God led them out of slavery in Egypt to a land of promise. The Babylonian Exile is the Exodus undone. Their land is gone and their Temple is destroyed. With God's dwelling place in ruins, it must be hard not to believe that God has abandoned them. They are not only in exile, they are dead, extinct. It is all over. "Just like these bones, our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost, we are cut off completely." The people will end up staying in exile for 70 years, making a new living, marrying and having children. They will gradually lose touch with their homeland but not with their longing for it or their heartbreak at losing it.

Is there hope? When you think that God has abandoned you, what else is there to do besides give up and die? How will you ever believe again that God is here and cares for you? What can convince you that you will live again?

"Let me tell you what I saw," says Ezekiel. "You see just dry bones. I saw God breathing the spirit of life back into the bones. I heard God promise to open our graves and bring us back to our land and let us live again." Ezekiel's over-the-top vision pulls the people back from the brink of hopelessness, which is critical because to lose hope completely is to lose the will to live, and then to die. It takes a powerful vision to jolt the people to hope again, and to believe again. "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves."

Five hundred years later, Jesus brings Ezekiel's vision to reality. Jesus comes to open graves. But unlike Ezekiel whose words bring hope to his people, Jesus faces opposition. In the first chapter of the Gospel, John complains, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Jesus performs signs to show that with his coming, the world is transformed and will never be the same again. With his coming, God's glory is here, if only they can see it. But they don't. At a wedding feast, he turns water into wine, proving that he gives an abundance of gift, but the groom merely compliments the quality of the wine. Jesus raises the stakes. He feeds a multitude with just a bit of bread, and then tells the crowd that with him, they never need to be hungry again because the Bread of Life is here, is he who is speaking, but the people are offended and go away grumbling. He gives sight to a man born blind, and then tells the

crowd that sight is available to all because the true light, the light of the world, is here, is he who is speaking, but the people and especially the Pharisees are offended and refuse to believe that there is light, and life, and hope, and a different world. Now Jesus tackles life and death and challenges the power of death itself. Note, by the way, that when Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, this is not a resurrection. It is a resuscitation of a corpse. Lazarus will die again. So I am not sure that his being brought back to life is much of a favor to him. But it is a powerful act, like the vision of Ezekiel, designed to jolt a cynical people into believing in the power of God. Jesus hopes that the raising of a man from the dead will be the convincing sign. He prays to God for the people, “that they may believe that you sent me.” As John says, “Many of the Jews who had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.” But some did not. What will it take for people to believe in the power of God? What will it take to see the glory of God? Must Jesus reverse the power of death itself? What can overcome a culture of unbelief?

I wonder what kind of reception Ezekiel would have today. What if we heard Ezekiel now? What if we saw Jesus today perform his signs? Are we a believing people, or do we live in a culture of unbelief? We are a sophisticated world. With all of our scientific knowledge, we don't much believe in miracles, and people like Ezekiel are often considered candidates for psychiatric hospitals. We know better; we are not so naive. But our sophistication tends to make us cynical and closed to unexpected happenings—miracles, if you will. If somebody at a party turned water into wine, or if somebody turned a dead man into a live one, I think we would consign the story to the National Enquirer.

But Jesus says, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” When we are so ready to unbelieve in the presence of God in this world, we close our eyes to the glory of God. Are you ready to see the glory of God? What is the tomb that keeps you from seeing God? What is the grave that buries you from hope? Are you ready for God to open up your grave and put his spirit in you? Are you ready for someone to rise from the dead? As we approach Holy Week, let these questions prepare you for the One who gave his life so that you may believe, and then rose from the dead.