

Getting It Together

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45; Psalm 130 3-09-08

About nine years ago, during the Lenten season, my mother was in the process of dying. She was blessed with a very brief period of illness from early March until mid-May. During this time frame I spent a great deal of time with her, knowing that the end of her earthly existence was near. It was a very difficult, yet a very peaceful time in my life.

I remember very clearly reading the same scriptures we have for this morning as I sat beside her and worked on a sermon for the coming Sunday. I knew there was no way she was going to be able to survive the series of medical set-backs she had suffered and that it was only a matter of time before she escaped this earthly coil. Somehow, in the readings from Ezekiel and John, I found comfort. Perhaps, this was only natural, as a pastor.

But those dry bones scattered all over the valley of death springing back into life brought a smile to my face. I knew my mother was weary and that she would not be brought back to us, not even as Lazarus had been restored. But I believed that she would journey on before us to a better place. I believe that we all do. We have a God who loves us and will certainly not make us suffer when we move from this level of existence to the next.

I find it very interesting that two such diverse stories of resurrection come to us just before the big day of the big resurrection—Easter. And our third reading from Romans ties in neatly by reminding us that a life in the Spirit is what life is all about. While we dwell in our earthly bodies the energy that pushes us forward is the Spirit that dwells within.

We have all heard the saying, “The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” Well, here we have the Spirit overcoming the weakened condition of men and women and making the dry bones dance again and calling forth Lazarus from his tomb. The Spirit helps us in getting it together again when all we seem to see around us are the old dry bones of dreams lost and hopes denied.

The nation Israel was in such a state when Ezekiel came across that valley of very dry bones. While it seemed that nothing could help God’s chosen people recover, there was a stirring as the Spirit renewed those people and restored their hope in a future that would and could be better if they would learn to follow the will of their Creator.

Lazarus coming forth from the tomb emerged, because the Spirit was revived in him by his good friend Jesus. This miracle was worked so that Jesus could help those who followed him see and understand that he was doing his Father’s work. Those early followers had a difficult time grasping just what their friend was about. Something as dramatic as the resurrection of Lazarus should have put all their doubts to rest. As we know from the rest of the story, it did not.

What matters most in these two intriguing stories is the renewal of life and hope we see. We should be reminded that in our own lives, when things seem to be the most dead, there is still hope. They should help us see that we live life through a series of resurrections—times of death to old ways and times of awakening to new understandings of what is most valuable for us in life.

Yes, of course, I am ringing the gong of change, again. But, you see, that is the message that lies in almost each and every story and parable in our Bible. The message is there for us because that is the way that leads us to a more abundant life. It does not mean that we need to change things dramatically by overthrowing our old way of life and running away—many of us are quite happy with the way things are. It does mean that we look for areas in our lives that will be improved by a little more effort, a little more movement of the Spirit, a little more focus and understanding than we now have. It means that we are willing to grow beyond our safe boundaries and venture out of a tomb we may be in far too early.

Years and years ago I met a man who became a good friend to me. He was about a quarter of a century older than I was when we first met. After many discussions with him he said to me, "You have come to me too late in life, I cannot change." What he seemed to be saying to me was, not so much, "I cannot change, but I will not."

I found that very sad. Explain to me, please, what is "too late in life."

If a valley of dry bones is not "too late" in life to have some hope and to be encouraged into change by God, what is? Is it ever "too late" in life to become better beings? When is it "too late" to become more understanding, more patient, more loving, more willing to see someone else's point of view? When is it "too late" to open the doors and allow another into our protected space overcoming the fear we have of what the other might bring or how we might be disappointed? When is it too late to process the knowledge we gain from our faith that our life is a series of beginnings and endings--of little deaths and resurrections to new life? When are we "too old to change?"

These are questions we all must answer for ourselves. But if we allow the light of Jesus to penetrate our darkness, we begin to understand that it is never too late to try again, never too late to begin anew. It is never too late to hear our old dry bones of disillusionment, disappointment and despair begin to rattle into place once again and give us a chance to dance the glorious dance of life.

This has been a long and difficult winter. It is drawing to an end as we "spring ahead." There is hope and promise for us as the little song "Hymn of Promise" tells us:

*In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed an apple tree;
In cocoons a hidden promise: Butterflies will soon be free.
In the cold and snow of winter There's a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season, Something God alone can see.*

*There's a song in every silence, Seeking word and melody;
There's a dawn in every darkness, Bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds a mystery,
Unrevealed until its season, Something God alone can see.*

*In our end is our beginning, In our time infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our life eternity.
In our death a resurrection; At the last a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, Something God alone can see.*

God could see the promise in the valley of dead dry bones, and in the tomb of Lazarus---God sees, too, the promise within each of us as we work on getting it together.

-- Amen