

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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RESURRECTION AND LIFE

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Ezekiel 37:1-10

John 11:17-27, 38-44

It was, perhaps, ironic that when I opened my computer to write you a sermon about Jesus saying "I am the resurrection and the life" the machine sighed and died. No life, nothing, just dead. And the question was, could it be resurrected?

This was the question Ezekiel had when he saw the valley full of dry bones, in his vision. God asked him, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And he answered, "O Lord God, you know." It is the question that I sometimes want to ask of the church. Can these bones live? And the answer is the same, "O Lord God, you know."

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life," and he said it at the time that it was most appropriate and most needed, he said it at a time of death and mourning. Lazarus, his friend, had died, and Martha, Lazarus' sister, beside herself with grief, said, what many of us have said in our hearts to God, "If you had been here, this would not have happened." We may not say it in words, we may not want to actually accuse God, but we wonder, where God is when the hard things happen, when the things that we have dreaded actually take place. Whether it is an illness or a death, a separation, or the outcome of an interview - or an election. "If you had been here..." And of course what we mean is "Where were you?" Where were you, God when this happened? Where were you when my hopes were dashed, when my dreams died? Where were you that this thing that is so dreadful to me should have happened?

Jesus does not answer the unspoken question, the "Where were you?" But he does say to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." He promises life, life renewed, life restored. But Martha can barely hear his words. She says, and I always imagine her saying this very drearily, as if it is what she has to say, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." This is what she has been taught to believe, and she knows it is the right thing to say and to hold on to, but it isn't giving her much comfort in the present moment. And Jesus says, "I am the resurrection, and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives believing in me will never die."

That is a huge statement. That is turning everything on its head. Jesus, speaking in the divine name, had declared the defeat of death, and the new age of life with God in God's kingdom to have begun already, with him. It is a quite new way of thinking, and to hear it must have been a real jolt to Martha. But almost before she has time to think about it, or take it in, he is asking "Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this? Because it is that which makes all the difference. This was the challenge to Ezekiel: "Can these bones live?" "Do you believe this?" And Ezekiel hedged his bets a little at first with a non-committal answer, though when he was called to action, he did as he was commanded and spoke to the bones, spoke God's

word to them and yes, they did live. They rattled, and the skeletons formed, and then they became more life-like as the sinews, muscle and skin enlivened them. And then, then Ezekiel had to call for the breath, which gave them life. Dry bones one moment, and an active crowd soon after, because Ezekiel believed it could happen and so did what God said.

Jesus is the resurrection for us as individuals. Martha was to see her brother restored to life and returned to her, which meant that her life too was restored and fulfilled again. When we think of Jesus' statement in an individual way, as a one-to-one with us, as indeed it was with Martha, then we are in the same place as we were when we heard Jesus, the gate, say that he had come that we might have life in all its fullness. Jesus is promising that we can know resurrection life now. We don't have to wait till the last day, the end of time, for new life to be given to us; and we don't need to wait until our last day either. Resurrection life is life with God, and it is available to us now, not at or after death. In fact it is specifically not about death, it is about us living believing in Jesus, living following him, trusting him. Then we will know the fullness of life that he promises and then the physical changes that mortality brings need not be something to fear or a barrier to our faith.

So when Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life" the first thing to ask yourself is, do you believe this? If you do, then you will find it possible to live with faith in God, with trust in God. You will find it possible to live with the dry bones of your life brought back to vibrancy. You will have purpose and you will know God's presence and leading. Not that it will always be easy, but it will be worthwhile. Do you believe what Jesus says about himself? Do you believe it for you, and not just in general? And can you believe it even when things seem all about death and life is drained of hope and meaning? Because that is when Martha was asked that question.

If you can believe it for yourself, then can you believe it for the church? I don't mean just for this church, though I do mean it for this church, but for the church in this land, and for our denomination, can you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? Can these dry bones live?

Last week I was attending a meeting for forward planning at which something that I already knew was said for the first time. And although I knew it, it was shocking to hear it spoken. What was said, by the convener of the Church of Scotland Mission and Discipleship Council, so someone who should know, was "There is no next generation for the Church of Scotland." There is no next generation. The number of people coming up through the church is not great enough to sustain its work when the current generation goes to their rest in God's presence. A generation is generally reckoned to be about 30 years. Yes, that means that for many of us here, the church will "see us out", but is that all we want? Do we want to be the last generation of the church?

Of course there are other expressions of church in our land, many of them, and some of them are growing, but none of them are as widespread as the Kirk, and the growth that they have is still patchy at best. Our land is facing a crisis of faith. The bones seem very dry. The body is already in the tomb, or so it seems to many, especially the many who have written off the church as a viable force in society. "I am the resurrection and the life...Do you believe this?"

I do believe it, but I also note that Jesus was speaking *after* a death. He was speaking to a woman who had witnessed the death and was grieving. He did not, and if you look at the beginning of the story you see that he deliberately did not rush

to save Lazarus before he took his last breath. And that is a challenging thought for me. Could it be that the church, which I love and which I serve, has to die before Jesus can resurrect it? It might. I think that certainly the form of the church which we know now will have to die. The structures, the way of doing things that is so dependant on a professional clergy, the pride in the past will have to die. The real life, the life of Jesus, which we do know in the church - and which we certainly know in this congregation - will need to be freed from perceptions and misconceptions so that people can see and recognise it for what it is. The love of God's people, for God and for each other and for our neighbours will need to be freed and let loose in the world, and to do that, some things, good things, cherished things, may need to die. Ouch!

We who are the last generation of the church in the way that it has been are called to an important but not a glamorous task. It is painful to see our church losing ground, losing numbers, losing influence, sometimes losing its way. It is painful to see the world holding our faith in what is at best liberal tolerance. It is tempting, because in situations of grief it is always tempting to look for someone to blame, but that is to waste energy. Our task is to find what needs to die and assist at the burial, and our task, more than ever is to come to Jesus and claim his promise to be the resurrection and the life. We need to see what new life he is calling us to, and what that will look like. We need to remember what the church is for, in terms of bringing the love of God to the world.

By the way, when I took my computer to be looked at, the advice I was given - and you couldn't make this up - was that I should effectively entomb it for three days and try again. I was to take out the battery and leave it alone for three days. So I did, but it didn't leap back to life, because it is a machine and not a person, nor a church made up of children of God. The solution for it was to take the important information from my laptop and transfer it to a new machine. I leave that thought with you, to reflect on, though not about computers. We are children of God, and Jesus' resurrection life is for us and can be used through us to bring life to the world, if not best in the form of the church as it is now, then maybe in a new form. Amen.

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