

Out of the Depths

Lent 5 Ezekiel 37:1-14 (Psalm 130) John 11:1-45

Slide: Napoleon's Grave

When I was in college, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Vienna, Austria and later also had the opportunity to sing with my college choir in China and Japan. And, more recently, I sang with the Master Singers in Paris and London. Throughout the places in the world where I have been, I have seen a lot of tombs, catacombs, and graves. Each country seemed to have their own unique way of honoring their dead.

Indeed, I have visited many an interesting grave, catacomb, and tomb. I have seen the gravesite of Mozart, or at least where they think he was buried. I've been to the Ming tombs in China and have seen gravesites of my own loved ones. Some of the gravestones I have seen at the St. John's Cemetery are beautiful reminders of those who

have gone before us, some of the grave stones being pretty old.

Slide: Paris Catacombs

In Paris, you can visit the old underground catacombs, where skeletons are piled one on top of each other because of the great disease that ravaged those in medieval times. It's eerie to think that a person can visit a place like that or even the ancient Roman catacombs where the early Christian art can still be seen.

One might think that with all of the places people are buried in this world, that the certainty of death outweighs the uncertainty of life. And you can see this in some of the graffiti of the French catacombs where it is written:

"Crazy that you are, why do you promise yourself to live a long time, you who cannot count on a single day?"

One may certainly begin to lose hope that life truly is

blessed and that life beyond is even more so.

Slide: Dry Bone

There is another story of catacombs, the story in Ezekiel. This prophet Ezekiel envisions a whole graveyard of dry bones that have no life, except that in this scripture, it is not a literal grave, but these skeletons here represent and symbolize Israel's exile to a foreign land, a land where they felt cut off from God, abandoned and downright left flat by the God they thought they trusted. In short, the people of Israel felt hopeless and wondered if God would ever act to help them again.

Slide: Lord, if you had...

Helpless and hopeless is also how Mary and Martha felt at the loss of their brother. In this yet another story of a tomb, the sisters ask Jesus the exact question we all wonder, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Had God left them;

were they in exile, too? They had sent for Jesus earlier, so why did he not come for four days?

It's the sort of question the people of Israel ask as well: "Can these lifeless bones live again?" Couldn't God have prevented the death of Lazarus in the first place? Couldn't God have saved Israel from Babylon? Or healed my father from cancer? Or stopped that car accident? Or kept my child safe?

And when the person Jesus was fond of took ill, Mary asked for help. But, again, Jesus delayed. And, as if we didn't get it the first time, we hear the question three times. Martha asks, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Mary, too, asked, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." And the crowd who followed her, in their own way asks the same, "Could not he who opened the eyes

of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Slide: Jesus weeping

What I find most interesting and perhaps most significant about what Jesus does next is that Jesus does not even try to answer their questions. Instead, we read and hear in scripture, “Jesus began to weep.” In other translations, it’s the shortest verse in the bible. The version simply says, “Jesus wept.” There isn’t some word just describing how Jesus felt. No, here we see quite plainly see that Jesus cried. When Jesus experienced the sorrow and the questions of those he loved, he responds by weeping. Let me just say that this word “weep” isn’t just shedding a little tear, or catching yourself with your chin trembling. This is weeping, audible sobbing. That’s what weeping is.

This very God, whom we profess, is not a remote god-in-the-sky God, far away from us. This one little verse in our Bible shows us

that this is a God who enters our lives and is deeply moved by anything and everything that threatens our well-being. This empathetic God is all over scriptures as the one who encourages that we bring every bit of anguish, difficulty, and sorrow in prayer. We are allowed to say as Mary did, “Lord, if you had been here...”

The psalm for this week is psalm 130. The choir will be singing an arrangement of this psalm at the late service, but it is one of the famous psalms often said at a graveside committal. In this psalm, we see that the bible is full of asking God for answers. The first few verses describe the writer’s cry:

Slide: Out of the Depths

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

Slide: God it is too late

We can cry to God, too, we can ask the hard questions, because God is a God who weeps when we weep. Our God is one in whom we can place our trust and hope even when we are hopeless because God knows of our pain and has experienced this pain. Even Jesus asked at the cross, "My God, why have you abandoned me?"

Slide: I will not lose hope

But, God does not just empathize with us. God also acts. As we saw with Jesus, he also acted, which led to the resuscitation of his friend Lazarus. The gift and hope of life after death God showed is in God's power. However, God never does act when we want, how we want, or in ways we may be able to tell. Often, too, we wait and wait and wait. But, if we do not believe that God is a God who acts out of love and for our good in our lives, than our hope is truly lost.

So we wait; and indeed, those who are

faithful know that waiting is a part of the Christian life. In our waiting, we do not see the catacombs, tombs, or cemeteries as places of death, but of promise, the promise that in God's compassion for us, God will act and give new life to us...and until then, weeps with us.

We wait in hope even while we cry out of the depths. The alternative is to lose hope and spiral to despair, believing we are cut off from God. However tempting that may be, however understanding it is to lose hope, hopelessness and despair is not how we ultimately respond; because we have Christ who intercedes for us and promises us resurrection. Even in the tomb, there is hope for life.

Slide: Robin

For the last week, I have been feeling this force of winter blues and blahs. We had one really amazing day of sun but the rest was really grey. While the hint I

there, I don't quite feel spring is quite come. The Robins have returned, but we are in that transition of mud and dinge and lack of green. Yet, I do know and believe that the blahs will not last forever. Spring will come as we know it does. The Lenten darkness of repentance will give over to the new life of Easter.

Slide: I am the resurrection

Therefore, however painful our lives are now; however hopeless things may be for some of us; however sorrowful we are, or sick we are, if we have feelings of loss, and even if things are perfectly fine and what we experience is a sense of boredom from a lack of action ourselves, we ultimately know that Christ will transform us – because he did for Lazarus.

Today during communion, you are invited to a healing station just under the pulpit. This healing station is a waiting station – a place where we wait for God to act in

healing our lives. No matter your need or your doubt that God does indeed act for you, come for healing and hear the words of hope.

In the raising of Lazarus, we see that God does and will act, and God has acted through the person of Jesus Christ. No matter what, that promise of action can never be taken from us. And, until we do see God act in our lives, we have permission as the loved ones of Jesus had to ask, "Lord, if you had been here..."

Slide: Jesus weeping

And, Jesus will weep with you.

Amen.

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Slide: Jesus weeping

And, Jesus will weep with
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Amen.