

Lent V (A)
Ezekiel 37.1-14; Psalm 30; Romans 8.6-17; John 11.1-45
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
9 March 2008

Them Bones

~Paul H. Friesen~

Them bones, them bones gonna walk around; Now hear the word of the Lord.

Most of us first heard the words of this famous black Spiritual long ago. And most of us have listened to the words of the even more famous vision from the prophet *Ezekiel* long before this morning—the vision which that Spiritual has so wonderfully begun to interpret for us.

Anglicans confess weekly, with hundred of millions of Christians around the world that they believe ‘in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.’ And they believe this on God’s word. In other words: *Them bones, them bones gonna walk around; Now hear the word of the Lord.* We believe in the resurrection to eternal life, not the pagan idea of the ‘immortality of the soul’.

Well, the vision of the prophet Ezekiel, and the next long, long Lenten story about Jesus in the Gospel of John give us no choice. We have to talk about the resurrection this morning, and to do that we have to talk about our bodies this morning. What we think about our bodies now has a lot to do with what we think about our bodies after our death.

I would like to enter this topic this morning through a side door, a bit of a conversation I had with my younger daughter yesterday morning. As you know children often keep us on track—they take an idea and run with it, without our confusion and distractions.

Daddy: We have to stop at the watch store for a battery.

Talia: Why?

Daddy: Mommy’s special watch doesn’t work. It needs a new battery.

Talia: Oh.

Daddy: You know, the watch that was Grandma’s (my stepmother’s). When she died, and went to heaven, Grandpa gave it to Mommy (my father’s only daughter-in-law.)

Talia: Oh—she wasn’t wearing the watch when she died?

Daddy: Uhhh...Everything Grandma needed was already in heaven.

Talia: What are those things there? (We were just passing by St. John’s Cemetery at this point).

Daddy: Gravestones, where people are buried.
Talia: Oh.
Daddy: Uhhh...(Here I fell into silence.)

You've probably had a conversation like this with a four-year old who has heard a bit about heaven before. I know I ran out of words and I'm not sure if I said anything my daughter will remember, but she has said something I won't forget. She thought if Grandma was wearing a watch when she died, she would still be walking around heaven with it. But she forgot to put it on! In other words, this life is connected to the next, like two chapters of the same story.

And that leads us to the *first great truth* about our bodies and about the resurrection. Christians confess with their Jewish ancestors that *to be created is to be created in human bodies*. This is why Christians are so very faithful and careful in thinking about the beginning and end of human life. It's why we say the body has dignity. It's why we say the body has dignity. We don't confess that our bodies are like 'God's body', but we do confess that 'our bodies are us', creations, gifts from the God we worship.

Whether we are young or old; black, white or any colour in between; male or female; this shape or that; handicapped or fully enabled; sick or healthy, 'our bodies are us.' We are of course more than animals who live by reflex—but God, in the beginning, didn't create human spirits and go looking for bodies for them. In the story of our creation in the Scriptures, in *Genesis*, God created us out of the stuff of the earth (however it was done, however many millions of years it took) and breathed his spirit into us.

Every human conception is like an act of creation, with God's breath, God's spirit imparted to that tiny embryo as it comes into being. We are back at the beginning when, we hear, 'the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.'¹

This is why we confess the mystery of 'one Lord, Jesus Christ, ...[who] by the power of the Holy Spirit became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.' It's why at the Eucharist for 2000 years we have not just sat together and thought spiritual thoughts about this Jesus, but rather think with our bodies as we eat bread and drink wine that we say somehow communicates Christ to us. It's why the old Anglican prayer says what it says after the Eucharist, about us going out of our worship to offer to God 'ourselves, our souls and bodies.' It is why Christians are so very faithful and careful in thinking about the beginning and end of human life. It's why we say the body has dignity.

¹ *Genesis* 2.7. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted otherwise.

We are not divine spirits trying to escape human existence. We live our human lives, our Christian lives as if they will continue in a body when our human bodies fail us. *To be created by God is to be created in human bodies.*

There are terrible truths, we all know, that have touched us, or will touch us, or our families, or our fellow human beings—truths about how disease can ravage our bodies, or how one human being can violate another, or one race can try to annihilate another.

But as Christians we don't take these tragedies as a sign that human bodies are disposable, and forgettable. Rather we say as the Apostle Paul said to the Church in Rome: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.'²

This was the ancient glimmer of hope that the prophet *Ezekiel* had in his vision when he heard the Lord command him to speak to the bones in the dry valley, and speak God's word: 'I am going to open your graves, O my people...I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.'

To be created by God is to be created in human bodies. This is where we live out life, this is where our Christian lives are lived. This is why we call our church community 'the body of Christ', as St. Paul repeatedly called it. This is why our mission is not to 'save souls', but to save people, that is, to participate in God's great work of redemption in our neighbourhood.

And so to move to a second thought; because we believe we were created in human bodies *we confess a belief in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting rather than the mere immortality of the soul.*

The world in which the earliest church found itself was called the Hellenistic world, a world dominated by the culture of ancient Greece, though ruled by the Romans. That world was full of contradictions about the human body.

In some ways the human body was glorified, especially those bodies that were perfectly proportioned. In other ways the body was despised—men were seen as intellectual and powerful, and women seen as wholly physical, capable of child birth and giving pleasure, but usually not much more. If we look at a lot of advertising today, and think about the image of women that is often projected, we can see that ancient view re-emerging. We can see how we have slid from our own higher ideals about men and women, about both being created, body and soul, in the image of God.

² *Romans* 8.22-23.

It is no wonder in the early church, and now, that some thoughtful people, and some Christians think about saving souls out of bodies.

But in the story of Lazarus' miraculous resurrection the great truth about human resurrection is found: 'Martha said to [Jesus], "I know that [Lazarus] will rise again on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life".'

Jesus is the resurrection and the life (everlasting). As many four year olds confess, there is a connection between this life and the next life, and that connection is the body each of has been given, and the created world, which will be transformed, redeemed, receive the Spirit, the breath of God, and live forever.

The story of the resurrection of Lazarus, one of the miracles or signs of Jesus, was not put in the Gospel to give false hope to the dying. It is there in our Scriptures as a story that reveals to us the connection between this life and the life everlasting. It is not, as some horror films take these things, the resuscitation of a cadaver, a zombie, the walking about of the living dead.

In this story Lazarus becomes a picture of the resurrection of the human race at the end of time. We will not become sparks of light floating about in the mind of some great deity. We will enter a redeemed life, a life larger than imagination as those we were created to be, just as Lazarus became a redeemed Lazarus.

But here is the wonderful bit: '[Jesus] cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out! The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go'." *We confess a belief in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting rather than the mere immortality of the soul. We believe in liberation.*

The Christian belief in the dignity of every human being is not because of the late 20th century discussion about universal human rights. We believe in the dignity of every human being because we confess and experience in many ways the truth of our creation body and soul in the image of God, and our resurrection, our redemption as those precious individuals we were created to be.

There are many things we have a hard time seeing—the meaning of suffering, the experience of biological death, the connection between our life after death and the future of the human race. But we do confess and can start to experience and know the meaning of our creation, and the purpose of 'the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting'.

In St. Paul's chapter on the resurrection, in his letter to the Church in Corinth, he gives us an image we can understand, a picture from the garden. 'But some

will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed...So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable...If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.’³

Thanks be to God, in whom we now live and shall live in bodies and souls liberated to be who we were created to be by the eternal love of God, through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

³ *I Corinthians* 15.35-44.