

WAKING THE DEAD

Ezekiel 37:1-14

March 29, 2009

(The Fifth Sunday in Lent)

Jesus said, **I am the resurrection and I am life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die....**

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of hell and death. Because I live, you shall live also.

A young man in the corn belt -- somewhere in Iowa, they tell me -- was called upon to speak those words at the graveside service of an old farmer. One of the local funeral homes called him up and said that someone had recommended him to them. Which was surprising to *him*, because he'd only *been* there a week. He'd come down from Chicago where he had just finished seminary. And he preached his first sermon there in Iowa just that past

Sunday. Anyway ... the man from the funeral home said, "We've heard all sorts of good things about you and we thought maybe you could help us out." And he told him about the old farmer who had passed away. "He wasn't connected to any of the churches," they said, "and he didn't have any family here -- or any friends, for that matter. Just kind of kept to himself like some of these old farmers do. So if you'd be so kind, we'd like to ask you to take care of the service for us." And the young preacher was flattered. "Of course," he said. "I'd be honored."

So the undertaker, as they say there in Iowa, told him that it would just be him at the service. Because the old man didn't have any family. He'd been a bachelor all his life. And he didn't often make it into town. So there weren't any friends, really. "It was just the old man and the corn," they said. "Oh, and a big friendly hound dog." And that was it. That was his family. "So it'll just be a graveside service," they told him. And the graveyard, of course, was on old family cemetery not too awfully far from town ... "as the crow flies," they said.

So that evening the young pastor found his little black worshipbook. And he brushed up his black suit and polished his shoes. And bright and early the next morning, he hopped in his car and off he went. Because he didn't want to be late -- figured he might need a little extra time just in case. And he drove for the better part of the morning, I think. But he didn't see a graveyard anywhere. So he kept driving along down one lane roads and over old wooden bridges that rattled and shook, until finally he saw a little cemetery up ahead.

And he was still a bit early, he thought. Because the hearse wasn't there yet. So he got out and walked around for a bit. And as he did, he saw something on a gravestone that got his attention. It was a woman's name. And just below her name it said ...

She lived with her husband for fifty years

And died in the confident hope of a better life.

And it just struck his funny bone, I think. I mean, he thought this was great. So he started looking at some of the other gravestones and reading the names and the

dates and the epitaphs etched in stone. And he found a grave in the corner of the cemetery -- off by itself. It said,

**Beneath this stone lies Dr. John Bigelow,
an atheist all dressed up with no place to go.**

Well, he had no idea that such precious gems as these could be found in a graveyard. But there they were. The place was just full of them. And he wanted to see them all, I think. But when he looked at his watch, it was well past time for the service to begin. And the hearse was still wasn't there. And at that moment it dawned on him that there weren't any new graves there. From the looks of things there hadn't been any in years. He was ... He was at the wrong cemetery.

So he hopped in his car and off he went. He drove and drove until finally he saw a mound of fresh not far from a little white frame church and an old farmhouse. The hearse wasn't there, mind you. But, by now, it had surely been there and gone. Though the grave diggers were there taking a lunch break under a tree.

So he turned off the little gravel road and drove past the church. And he waved at the workers under the tree. And he pulled up close to the mound of dirt. And sure enough the funeral director had been there and gone. In fact, the workers had already sealed the vault. And yet, he had been called upon to offer the committal for this poor old farmer. So he stood there by the grave, read a few verses from the gospel of John.

And then, of course, he offered a prayer and, as is the tradition there in the Midwest, he scooped up a handful of dirt, let it fall gently down into the grave and said, “This body we commit to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” And he stood there for a moment of silence. And as he returned to his car he overheard one of the workers say to the others, “Maybw we should *tell* him it’s a septic tank.” ✖

Things are not always as they appear are they?

Woody Canterbury was the church carpenter and community handyman in Blue Jay, West Virginia. And he was a saint if ever there was one. He was one of the

kindest, humblest, grinningest people you could ever hope to meet. And he was always thinking about other people. Always doing something to help somebody else.

But one day he was up on a ladder (with a hammer) banging away at a nail or something. But, whatever it was, he missed. Didn’t even come close. But he got his thumb, mind you. Whacked it hard. and broke it, I think. And when he did, he fell off the ladder and hit his head. And then the ladder came down and whacked him again ... in the head. And he didn’t get up.

When the neighbors found him there, they called the Fire Department in Beaver. (This was before 9-1-1) and in just a few minutes the ambulance came aqnd whisked him away to one of the hospitals in Beckley. And Ruth Payne (one of our older and more colorful members) heard this on her police scanner. And she ran to the window and there it was. She watched them lift his body onto the stretcher and take him away in the ambulance. And ... it was too much. So she called the parsonage. I knew something was wrong the moment I heard her voice. Because whe would always call and say, “Howdy-dooddy

down there!” But this time she didn’t even say hello. “Preacher,” she said, “It’s Woody. He’s fallen from the roof and it isn’t good.” And she started crying and couldn’t talk. “Does he need someone to take him to the hospital?” I said. “Oh, preacher,” she said. It’s too late... He’s already gone.”

He’s gone -- I knew what she meant. She meant he was gone. It was over. Just like that. I had seen him that morning at Hardee’s and now he was gone.... So I went straight to the hospital to be with the family. And I went to the emergency room and asked one of the nurses if the Canterbury family was still there. And she said, “No, Reverend... I’m sorry.”

“Well ... I’ve missed them,” I thought. “They’ve already gone.” And I started to leave. But just then the nurse said, “Would you like to go and be *with him?*” And I said, “Yes.” I thought I’d go and pay my respects and say a prayer for the family.

And the nurse motioned me back through the door. “Take all the time you need,” she said. I said, “Thanks.

Where is he?” She said, “He’s in the hall there.” ✕ I couldn’t believe it. They just left him in the hall? How could they do that? How can they be so cold? But there he was, just like she said. Just lying there on a gurney, white as a sheet. They could have at least moved him out of the hall. But there he was. Blue Jay’s handy-man saint. The carpenter of the church.

I walked over to him just to offer a silent prayer. And all of a sudden, his eyes popped open. And he said, “Howdy preacher, long time no see!”

“Woody,” I said. “It’s good to see you. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “Just cracked my noggin, that’s all ... You look a little pale though,” he said. “Maybe I should get up and let you lie down.” ✕ Sounded like a good idea at the time. Believe me. But we talked a bit and I had a prayer with him and went back to the parsonage. But before I could even get there, the word had spread all over Blue Jay that Woody was “gone.” And it took a day or two to clear all that up. People were sending sympathy cards and pies and casseroles and talking about what a

wonderful man he was. It was awful! Just awful! Except for Woody, of course. He just took it all in -- the praise the pies and all the kind and wonderful things people were saying. It was just great. So great that Woody's wife looked at me and said, "Preacher, we're going to have to do this again, sometime." ✕

Things are not always as they appear. Not even Iowa! Not even here!

That's what Jesus said to Martha, I think, when Lazarus her brother passed away. He said, Jesus said, **I am the resurrection and I am life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die....** And years later, says John, Jesus spoke to *him* in a vision. And he said, **I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of hell and death. Because I live, you shall live also.**

Ezekiel had a vision like that ... long before Jesus' time. In the days when the people of God were frightened and

worried ... and ready to give up on God altogether. But you know the story. All the troubles and trials God's people had been through had just knocked the wind out of their sails. And they were drifting further and further away from God. The truth is God seemed like a stranger instead of a friend. Someone distant and far removed from them.

And jusy when it seemed that things couldn't get any worse, they did. The bottom fell out. And their enemies came and destroyed the city -- the city of God! They tore they burned down the temple and destroyed their homes. And they marched the people of God through the wilderness to some ungodly place where they were forced to live as "strangers in a strange land" (says the psalmist). And there they would stay -- there they would die, they thought. Because they had abandoned God, God would abandon them... and leave them to die.

And that's when Ezekiel the prophet had this dream. Only it wasn't a dream, really. It was more like a vision. "God lifted me up in the Spirit," he said. "And he set me down in a valley. And it was full of old bones, nothing but

bones from one end to the other.” And from the looks of those bones they’d been there awhile. All bleached out and brittle. Those bones hadn’t seen life in who knows how long. But in that “strange land” -- that dead, dried up valley where there was no life -- God spoke to Ezekiel. He said, “Tell me, mortal ... Can these bones live?” And Ezekiel looked out over that “graveyard” and said, “Are you kidding me, Lord? You know that.... Can these bones live! Just *look* at them, Lord. You tell me!”

But God said, **“Mortal, speak to these bones. Preach to them, brother. Preach the word to these bones and say, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.’”**

“Say what?” said Ezekiel? Why waste your breath on a bunch of old bones? Why not go somewhere else and preach to a more lively bunch? To people who’ll hear what you have to say and do what you tell them, and be the people you call them to be?” Well ... he *did* have a point. You can just hear all the church growth experts saying, “Amen! We’re with you, Ezekiel! Don’t waste your time on those old dried up bones. They’re set in their ways. They’ll never change!”

But God said, **“No. Don’t listen to them. Listen to me. Preach, son of man. Preach to these bones and say, ‘This is what God says. God says, ‘I’m going to put breath in you again. Give you a second wind, I am. And I’m going to make you come alive. And then, he said, then you will know that I AM, the Lord.’”**

And Ezekiel stood above the valley. And he preached the Word of the Lord to those bones. And all of a sudden he heard something rattle and shake. And the bones came together, each one in its place (just as it says in the song). But they weren’t just bones anymore. They were covered with flesh and hair -- with muscle and skin. They looked like *somebody*, almost. But they weren’t They were still dead. Still gone. No life. No breath.... They still weren’t the people God wanted them to be.

So the Lord spoke again, **“Mortal, he said, ‘Now preach to the wind. And you say to the wind, ‘Come. Come from the four winds O Breath, and breathe on these who are dead, that they might be alive!’”** And Ezekiel stood there in that valley of death. And he lifted his voice to the wind -- to the Spirit of God. And it blew

down into that valley of bones. And the Breath came into those old dried up bodies. And they were alive. They stood on their feet, the people of God! And there were so many of them it looked like a great army.

Oh, it was a vision, a gift, a message from God. And it was loud and clear and true and strong: **If God can turn a heap of old dead bones into a living, breathing, army of saints, then he can breathe life into his people and help them be who he wants them to be.**

Isn't that what Jesus said when he called Lazarus out of the tomb? **I am the resurrection and I am life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die....**

Ah, but that was so long ago. Two thousand years. I mean, that was then but this is now. And now some people say the church is like Lazarus, sealed up in a tomb. The church, they say, is like that valley of bones the prophet saw in his vision. Because there's no life there. It's gone. And it's only a matter of time, they say, until the

church is a thing of the past. Dead and gone ... because they can't be what God called them to be (in this world).

But God is calling us to open our eyes and see the vision. Can you see it? God is still God. And we are his people. And that same life-giving wind is still blowing today -- still breathing new life into his people and into his church. God is still calling his people to come out of the grave and live in his love. So take a deep breath (of the Spirit) and open your eyes. And look for the presence of God here in this place -- in each other -- and you will begin to see signs of life (of new life) in the Church that you never dreamed were there. And God will touch a whole new generation with the living hope and the healing love of Christ in you.

[I am the resurrection and I am life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live...]

There's a church in South Dakota that knows something about that, I think. It's in a little place called Lemmon, which according to some people is a lot like being nowhere, at all. Because Lemmon, South Dakota is

not a very big place. There isn't a town there, really. Or even a village. In fact, there's not much of a community there. Just one little church. And the sad thing is they didn't even have enough members to get a full-time preacher there. They'd get lay preachers there for a week or two at a time, or old preachers who should have retired long before they ever got to Lemmon, South Dakota.

Most Sundays they'd have Sunday School, eat the Lord's Supper, sing a hymn and go home. Sometimes they'd have a sermon. Sometimes. It was just a little church. It had an old wood stove in the center that hardly heated the building -- out there in the middle of nothing. It didn't amount to anything -- nothing like the churches on TV [or even this church]. And some people, mind you -- a lot of people -- would see it and say it was dead. "There's no life in that church. It has no future. They may as well turn out the lights and lock the doors, because that little church doesn't have a chance. It can never be what God wants his church to be."

But there was something there that most folks didn't see. Something stirring deep in the bones... as if God was

breathing his breath into that little group of people, raising them up, bringing them to life. Something was happening there in spite of all outward appearances. Because young people came out of that church and became missionaries. And some became ministers and teachers in Christian universities. And some became doctors who seek out the poor and the needy. People there at Lemmon shared their gifts and their hearts and that one gift that Paul says is the greatest of all gifts -- and that is their love.

And the church at Lemmon prays -- and not just for each other. They pray for the world. They pray for the hungry. They pray for people who are living in poverty. And they pray for God's peace.

It's just a small church in the middle of nowhere... But someone figured it all up. And they said that when you add it all together, the total service to Jesus Christ by young people going out from that church was over two-hundred and eighty-one years.

It's just a small church. Some people see it and shake their heads and say, "There's nothing happening there. Nothing going on in there. They ought to just give up." Trouble is we serve a God who wakes the dead and calls them to new life. We serve a God who breathes life into even the driest of old dried-up bones.

And that same life-giving God wants nothing more than to lift us up, fill us with new life, and help us be who he calls us to be. A church alive in his Spirit and filled with his love.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

BENEN, OBLSB

