



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“Can these bones live?”
Lent 5A, March 26, 2023
Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-45

A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

The nurses found Pat not breathing the first night after her knee replacement surgery. They did not know how long she had been gone. They revived her and called her husband who called me. I asked Tom if he wanted me to start a prayer vigil for her or did he want me to come to him. It was about 2:30 in the morning, and he needed me at the hospital. I did call 4 people later in the morning, the diocesan office (because Pat was well loved and had served as chaplain to all the ECW's throughout the diocese), the choir (because after my begging her, she had stayed on as choir director the first year I was at that church), my secretary who started the prayer chain, and my husband who got in touch with his prayer warriors. Tom and I took turns praying with her. By 4:30 that afternoon she was writing me notes. She still had tubes everywhere and could not speak, but I could see the anger in her eyes and read the fury in her words on paper. She was so angry. She was angry at me, at Tom, at the doctors and the nurses. Over and over she said that she would not have wanted to be revived. She had a DNR – a “Do Not Resuscitate” order in their condo – in the freezer. But we were in the hospital, and even at their home, who would think of looking for a DNR in the fridge, next to the ice cream and frozen lamb chops?

My former parishioner Pat was also a dear friend. Not long after she got home, she reiterated she didn't want to come back. She spoke of the peace and

comfort of what we would call heaven. She called it home – her true home. And she was still so angry that “we” had revived her. People who have had what is now called “near death experiences” know exactly what Pat felt. There is nothing “near” about these experiences, because I and many others know that they have died and been with God in their new lives. And coming back to this life is confusing and not at all comfortable. Pat didn’t want her old bones to live again. She had been where there was no pain or discomfort, and then she was back. Now to be sure, she soon was doing her bed exercises in ICU – she had been a physiotherapist after all, and she knew she had to get her new knee moving. And she finally came to understand that her old bones had to live again for God’s purposes.

What of Lazarus’s bones? Could they live again? And his sinews and flesh and skin? What of his breath? Ezekiel prophesied that the dry bones of Israel could live again. But what about Lazarus? God told Ezekiel “I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves.” And Lazarus had been in the grave four days.

Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus that his dear friend their brother Lazarus was ill, that he was dying – near the grave.¹ Our Lord remained across the Jordan. He waited.² Jesus already knew that Lazarus had died. 1st century people buried the dead on the day of death.³ People thought the soul hovered over the body for three days, but Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. There were elaborate burial rites observed by the Jews that could last 30 days. The mourning ceremonies were well under way at Mary and Martha’s home. Lazarus was dead, really dead. Jesus delayed his return from across the

Jordan to go to Lazarus in Bethany near Jerusalem to redefine death – his own impending death, Lazarus’s death, Pat’s death, and our own deaths. Jesus could not avoid the authorities who wanted to capture him. To go to Bethany would put his own life in jeopardy and would lead to his death on the cross. He knew that his death was imminent and that his glory would be revealed. So to demonstrate to his disciples and his other followers – and to us – he postponed his return so that he could bring Lazarus back from the dead.⁴

When Jesus came to Lazarus’ grave, he showed his humanity; he wept. Yes, he loved Lazarus and his sisters so much that he was moved to tears. Then he prayed thanking God for hearing his prayer that his friend would live. Jesus called out: “Lazarus come out!” And the man who had been dead four days came out of the tomb. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead not simply because he loved him, but so that God’s glory would be revealed to them – so that the people would believe. And they believed.

As one of Jesus’s closest friends, Lazarus might have been one of the few who believed that Jesus would come back from the dead. But, consider how Lazarus must have felt when he was resuscitated. The first thing he saw was his friend Jesus. Did he wonder: “Am I dead and with Jesus in heaven? Or am I still on earth?” How confused he must have been. He had embraced the indescribable comfort of death and had experienced life after death, and then he was back in our imperfect world. “No, no, let me go back, Lord,” he wanted to say.⁵ Pat told me that she felt that way, too.

Physical death is normal, but life in Christ will continue, and eternal life cannot be taken away by the death of the body. We need to be reminded of

this – often – but most especially this week before we enter Holy Week. The people of Bethany needed to hear Jesus teach them that he himself was the way to resurrection and to life. We need to hear this story – to hear it with our hearts – hear it over and over until we believe it. We need to believe it whenever someone we love dies, but also in anticipation of our own deaths. Death is part of life. We know that in our heads – in our minds – but we need to believe it with our hearts.

As Lent gives way to Holy Week and Holy Week to Easter, if we are honest, we all should be a bit anxious about the resurrection. Are we foolish or blindly optimistic to believe that we too may one day be resurrected? Or do we have faith that like Martha who trusted that we will be resurrected on the last day? Some among us may have experienced a near-death experience or had a friend or family member die and come back to life, but not back to life eternal. Those instances were resuscitation not resurrection. Lazarus and Pat would (and I will) die again.

No one in the 1st century knew exactly what Jesus meant when he promised that he would be raised on the third day, not even his disciples or his closest friends in Bethany, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. I think that they wanted to believe and we want to believe “that [Jesus] will come again and take us to a place [he has] prepared for us to live for ever. But do we wait with joy and gladness [for] that great day when [he] will call us forth to meet [him] there?” Can we say with conviction, Lord, “you are the resurrection and the life?”⁶

Next week we will together move towards our Lord’s triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, then we will hear the crowd quickly turn on him, and then we

will move towards the cross. We will experience his death. We then will live without his love for three days and wait to celebrate the death of death by his triumphant resurrection on Easter Day.

In the church the calendar defines all these dates; the date for Easter is based on a calculation defined by the date of the last full moon after the Vernal Equinox.⁷ The Vernal – or Spring – Equinox occurred last week on Monday, March 20th at 4:24 PM.

Last Tuesday, March 21st was World Down Syndrome Day. It is a day that gives people with Down Syndrome and their advocates a voice and an opportunity to be heard. My baby brother had Down Syndrome. And on World Down Syndrome Day – and every day, really – I remember how much Geri loved me and loved everyone.⁸

This Sunday, March 26th is Epilepsy Awareness Day. As March gives way to April, we will have April Fool's Day on the 1st (when we can be fools for Christ) and Palm and Passion Sunday on the 2nd is also world Autism Awareness Day (and National Peanut Butter and Jelly Day). This year Passover (which is also determined by the full moon) begins at sunset on Wednesday the 5th. April 6th is Maundy Thursday where Jesus washed his disciples' feet and when he instituted the Eucharist at his last Passover, but it is also National Epitaph Day, and I wondered what Lazarus's epitaph might be. Maybe "These old bones lived twice; I will rise again." What about the others? Mary's might say: "I will always sit at the Lord's feet!" Martha's might say: "Lord, tell my sister that I love her anyway!"

David Bowie died of lung cancer in January of 2016 just 2 days after the release of his last album “Blackstar.” His producer said that his death was no different from his life – a work of art.⁹ The BBC referred to Bowie’s song entitled “Lazarus” from that album that begins this way: “Look up here, I’m in heaven.” “Leave it to Bowie to not only write his own epitaph, but sing it and make a video of it as well.”¹⁰ I think Bowie’s epitaph should have read “I am free, free like a bluebird” a line from his song “Lazarus.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s epitaph embodies his faith: “Free at last, Free at last, Thank God Almighty I’m Free at last.”

Sir Winston Churchill’s epitaph on his headstone reads: “I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter.” We know that the Lord was ready for the Prime Minister’s arrival!

My friend’s Pat’s tombstone should read: “Glad to be back, Lord!”

My baby brother Geri’s should read: “He was the best of us.”

The tombstone for Mel Blanc who was the famous voice for Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Porky Pig reads “That’s all, folks.” But we trust that that is not all there is, for we believe in life after life, eternal life as promised by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Lord, may it be so. **Amen.**

¹ See John 11:12. Jesus said that Lazarus had fallen asleep – a euphemism for dying in the 1st century. The disciples misunderstood and thought that Lazarus “would be all right.”

² The disciples feared for Jesus’s life if he went back to the sick man’s home – near Jerusalem – for the authorities were looking for him. Jesus told them that he was going to awaken Lazarus from his sleep – to raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus needed to do this so that they – and we – would believe. Now Jesus loved Lazarus, but he waited two days before even leaving to travel to Lazarus’s home to heal him. Then at his own peril he left with the disciples to go to his friend.

³ “Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him” (Acts 5:5, 6).

⁴ Martha went to meet Jesus, and Mary stayed behind to greet more mourners. Martha believed Jesus to be a healer. She anticipated another miracle, that Jesus would come as soon as she sent word so that her brother Lazarus would be restored to health. Martha was justifiably peeved. She said: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21). But then she went further saying to Jesus: “but even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him” (11:22). Jesus assured her that Lazarus would rise again. But Martha thought he was referring to the end times when Lazarus would be resurrected. Everyone who heard this must have been wondering what Jesus meant. Martha returned to her home and went to Mary and told her privately to go to Jesus. And she went, but the mourners followed her. Rather than rebuking Jesus, the more contemplative Mary fell at Jesus’s feet and wept saying: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:32). And “Jesus began to weep” (11:35).

⁵ Was this act a resurrection or resuscitation? Lazarus would die again, but Jesus after being raised from the dead would not die again. And we have the promise that – just as Lazarus would rise again after his second life – that he and we will rise again to eternal life.

⁶ From the Hymn “Bethany,” text ©1993, by Gracia Grindal, a professor of rhetoric and a hymnist.

⁷ The full moon in April is called the Budding Moon, or Pink Moon for the pink flowers that bloom in the spring.

⁸ I often wear my 3-21 socks and my “Down Right Perfect” tee shirt.

⁹ Bowie’s producer Tony Visconti, in tribute said: “He made ‘Blackstar’ for us, his parting gift.”

¹⁰ Bob Harris of the BBC quoted a listener speaking of the cut “Lazarus.”

<https://whyevolutionistrue.com/2016/01/12/lazarus-david-bowies-musical-epitaph/>