

Glimpses of Resurrection

Joyce Hollyday

Ezekiel 37:1-10; John 11:32-44

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A few weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Lent, Ken Sehested mentioned in his sermon a Lenten Fast for Peace, which he and I and a number of peacemakers around the country participated in back in 1991. It was a little shocking to me that night to realize that that effort took place twenty years ago. And that the war in question was Iraq. I heard this week that our secretary of defense is declaring that we may not make it out of Iraq by the imposed deadline of the end of this year.

I was with Sojourners community and magazine in 1991, and that spring we organized a march from the National Episcopal Cathedral to the White House. More than 3,000 people came from around the country, streaming through Washington, D.C., in a candlelight procession to demand that President Bush #1 not go to war against Iraq.

Other marches were taking place around the country, and public opposition was strong, but still Bush and his cronies launched that war. U.S. forces bombed Baghdad's Amariya shelter, filled with women and children, on Ash Wednesday. I didn't know much about fasting, but I think a lot of us felt like we'd tried everything else we could for peace.

People fasted in different ways. I chose to drink only water and juice for nourishment. That was the year that I learned how long Lent is. And when I discovered that, when people talk about the forty days of Lent, they're not counting the Sundays.

I think of Lent as being a lot like spring in the western North Carolina mountains. One day brings a burst of colorful blossoms and a chorus of happy tree frogs, and a few days later they're in a deep freeze. We're engaged in a dance of hope, reveling in the moments of warmth and catching the glimpses of rebirth and renewal amid the leftovers of winter's chill.

I'm feeling grateful for the passages that appear in our lectionary today. We're still two weeks away from Easter, and we have a lot of difficult ground to cover: confrontation, betrayal, interrogation, torture, death by crucifixion. But tonight we're given two glimpses of resurrection. Hear these words from Ezekiel 37:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live. And you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

It sure looked like death in that valley. Death as far as the eye could see. A vast expanse filled with dry, scattered, bleached bones—site of a great battle with massive casualties. It's important for us to note that this valley was in Mesopotamia—present-day Iraq.

Imagine yourself as the prophet Ezekiel "set down" in the middle of that valley. How amazing. How terrifying! A great rattling, as those bones arose from the ground and formed themselves into skeletons, as described in the African-American spiritual: foot bones connecting to ankle bones, ankle bones connecting to leg bones, leg bones connecting to hip bones. Hands attaching to arms, attaching to shoulders. Toes and fingers flying onto hands and feet, skulls hopping up on spines. Then the sinews appearing, the skin taking shape, and the breath—the breath giving life.

Or imagine yourself at the edge of Lazarus' tomb. From John 11:

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him." But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.

Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone.

And Jesus looked upward and said, "Abba, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bounds with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed, in him.

It sure smelled like death. "Already there is a stench," said Martha, the practical sister. But Jesus shouted at Lazarus to come on out. There must have been a hushed pause, as all eyes peered into the burial cave, expectant. And out he stumbled, mummy-like, with strips of the burial cloth still wrapped around him and covering his face. No less scary than a valley of bones come to life.

The critical ingredient in both these stories is that belief came before proof. Faith was absolutely essential to these miracles.

"Can these bones live?" asked God of the prophet. If Ezekiel had looked out over that massive valley of bleached bones and said, "Uh, I'm not thinkin' so," the story would have ended right there.

But instead it ends with God saying to Ezekiel, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ...But I am going to bring you up from your graves and...back to the land of Israel. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil."

The people of Israel, our ancient ancestors in the faith, who suffered under the cruelty and desolation of exile, were going home. Their spirits were going to come back to life, breathing that familiar air of home. Ezekiel had been given an unmistakable, bone-rattling sign of the promise.

"Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" said Jesus to Martha after her comment about the unsavory odor of her brother's death. It was an implied reminder of the words she had uttered just hours before: "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Only one other person in scripture makes this same declaration of faith—the apostle Peter. This affirmation by Peter became the confessional cornerstone of the church. A similar acclamation from the lips of a woman has been all but forgotten in church history. But Martha's belief in Jesus as the Son of God, along with her sister Mary's, was a crucial ingredient in the miracle of their brother's resurrection. God possessed the power, Mary and Martha possessed the belief, and Jesus gave himself over as the link for this exchange of power and faith that brought Lazarus back to life and into unbound freedom beyond the grip of death.

On Thursday night I went to hear David LaMotte, the Program Associate for Peace for the North Carolina Council of Churches, who was hosted at Warren Wilson College by Rachel Rasmussen's spirituality-and-social-justice team. David was magical as he wove music around the telling of his personal story.

He made a distinction that I found very helpful. He was encouraging the young people in the audience to change the world. He said many people respond to such a challenge with a resigned, "Nobody can change the world"—an understandable feeling, given the overwhelming local, national, and

global problems we currently face. But David said, "Nobody can *fix* the world. But everybody can change it. In fact," he said, "it's naïve to believe that you can live in the world and not change it."

This spring marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Freedom Rides for desegregating public transportation in this country. People suffered beatings and mob violence; some gave up their lives in that struggle. They didn't fix the world, but they changed it.

I'm reminded of the quote from anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that every has."

Last week I learned from a friend at Park Road Baptist in Charlotte about a project that members of her church and many others across the country are involved in. Large numbers of orphans are living on the streets in Haiti after the devastating earthquake, many lacking clothes, and the rape of young girls is widespread. A visitor discovered that the girls who are clothed are less vulnerable to sexual attack—both because they are literally covered, and also because clothes are a sign to predators that someone cares and is watching over them. She launched an effort to make simple dresses out of pillowcases and ribbon, which are now streaming to Haiti's streets and orphanages.

If you think you can't change the world, I encourage you to think of this little girl. I don't know her name. Her pillowcase-dress didn't bring her a loving family, or an end to her poverty, or justice—all of which she deserves. But it brought her a smile. And, we can hope, a bit of protection.

The fast for peace that I undertook twenty years ago brought me a sharpness of vision as the days stretched on—a feeling of looking at the world differently and a deepened sense of the presence of God. When my physical strength gave out, the assurance of God's sustenance took powerful hold. But still I didn't feel hope that Lent, when we were bombing Iraq's infrastructure to smithereens, three teenage friends were murdered on my neighborhood's deadly streets, and I was wading into a personal crisis that eventually led to my leaving Sojourners and starting my life over here.

In the third week of Lent, I went to the Nevada desert, for a peace witness at the Nevada Test Site, where our nation explodes nuclear bombs. After worship with the gathered crowd, I went to a spot where there was just me, and the gravelly sand, and an occasional Joshua tree with spiny branches outstretched like arms toward God. There, like other pilgrims to the desert had for centuries, I fell to my knees and discovered an emptiness beyond any I had ever known.

For the first time in weeks, I was able to weep, to allow my tears to spill and water the barren earth. And I found, in pouring out the despair, that there was room for hope. There, on the twenty-fourth day of my fast, I recalled the words of our gentle God, from the book of Isaiah: "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." At that moment, I had the thought that perhaps the rivers appear in dry deserts when enough of us have been moved by the earth's pain to weep, to add our ounce of compassion to what may become a mighty torrent of loving hope.

***God's power coupled with our belief
can bring about miracles.***

God is always doing new things. God's power coupled with our belief can bring about miracles. The world needs every last one of us to apply our bit of faith to whatever miracles, big or small, can be accomplished. Those of us with resurrection eyes—who can see past the valleys of bleached bones and the stinking caves of death—are needed to help breath life into those places. To drape bodies in pillowcases and ribbons like sinews on Ezekiel's skeletons. To drench spirits in hope like witnesses to a life unbound.

The greater resurrection is yet to come. And so we walk in faith through whatever valley we have been set in, on behalf of life. Pray. Hope. Serve. Teach. Write. Heal. Protest. Accompany. Advocate. Change the world.

Amen.