

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, 26 March 2023  
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR  
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the name of God whose loving breath is the life of the universe. Amen.

“Unbind him and let him go!” Those are Jesus’ last words in today’s Gospel. We live our lives bound by many things, bound by expectations, by circumstances, by fear, by outrage, by conflict, and, ultimately, bound by mortality. Being bound like this can keep us from any kind of action, can keep us from the hope that draws us forward, can keep us from living.

Jesus says, “Unbind him and let him go.”

Both of today’s famous stories, the Valley of the Dry Bones in Ezekiel and the Raising of Lazarus in John, point toward a fundamental truth we live by: “Death is not the end.” This is a very freeing assertion. Death and fear of death should not bind us.

Lent, as a time when we are called to confront our own shortcomings, can be discouraging, can make us feel bound up in hopelessness, feel that we will never be good enough, will never be able to make the world better in the face of overwhelming power, will never live up to expectations for compassion and service and victory over evil. Never, never, never.

‘Never’ is a word of despair – and Ezekiel lived in a time of despair, not unlike our own. So the Spirit of God took his spirit to a valley filled with bones. It is such a vivid vision. I like to keep Doré’s etching of the vision somewhere near. There they lie, skeletons all over the place, covering the ground. What could be more desolate? What could more clearly speak to us of death, hopelessness, futility, despair? What hope can there be when everyone is dead and gone?

But Ezekiel is told to preach to the bones. “Bones, hear the word of the Lord!” Now that is a call flying in the face of hopelessness.

We all know that even people alive and in reasonable circumstances don’t tend to listen to the voice of a prophet – so what hope is there of the prophet getting a hearing from people reduced to dried up skeletons?

But the passionate, faithful prophet preaches as he is instructed, however hopeless it might seem.

“Bones, hear the Word of the Lord!” And what does God have to say to this sea of 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 the sermon God commissions promises not only life, but personal connection with the Divine. Life and hope.

Then there is a great terrifying rattling and the bones are reassembled, and covered with flesh and skin, becoming recognizable human bodies again, but still there is no life in them. So what now?

Ezekiel is told to prophesy again, prophesy this time to the ‘*Ruach*’, that wonderful Hebrew word that means ‘wind *and* breath *and* strength *and* spirit.’ The same word occurs nine times in this passage. The repetition is not as powerful in English, because the same English word is not appropriate in each case.

*Ruach*, God’s *Ruach*, is what brought Ezekiel out to this desolate valley.

*Ruach* is the wind that blows around the earth.

*Ruach* is the spirit of God hovering over all things since the Beginning.

*Ruach* is the breath that gives life, that **is** life.

So Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the *Ruach*, that mysterious reality at the heart of life, God’s life, our life, the life of the planet. And he does, “Come from the four *Ruachs*, O *Ruach*, and breathe on these slain that they may live.”

And they do. The winds that swirl around the earth, bringing rain and snow and life to the land, bring life into these newly re-fleshed bodies. What was moments before a field of skeletons is now a crowd of living, breathing people. Death was not the end. *Ruach*, God’s spirit brought them to life.

Then we are told that this vision has been symbolic. The prophet is told that these bones are the people of Israel, who have given in to that greatest of sins, Despair. The people Ezekiel is called to preach to are going about moaning, “Woe is us! We are dried up, dead, without any hope. All is lost.” They have given up, feel as though they might as well be skeletons bleaching in the sun. They are completely bound up in their hopelessness.

The passage echoes with God's pleading. "Don't give up. I will give you hope. I will breathe my *Ruach*, my own breath, my life-giving spirit, into you – so that you will have life and hope. I will restore you to life. This is not the end." Ezekiel is given the task of unbinding them and letting them go back to life.

Then we come to the Gospel story of Lazarus. John tells us that Lazarus really is well and truly dead, unlike the self-pitying people of Ezekiel's time. It is last in this series of long Lenten Gospels, filled with engrossing detail about Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, about the message sent to Jesus regarding Lazarus' illness, about the response of the disciples. It is a story to capture our imaginations and hearts, as the vision of the dry bones captured Ezekiel's. Jesus is called back, both as a friend and as God's Messiah, to the bedside of his close friend. But his followers do not want him to go, because his life has been threatened. It is clearly not safe for him to go back toward Jerusalem. But he chooses to go – and his disciples choose to go with him, as Thomas says, "Let us go and die with him." They are not bound up by fear, even a quite reasonable fear of death. Their love for the Lord casts out fear and calls them forward. They are united and empowered by love.

When they approach the village, word comes to Jesus that Lazarus has already died. People have gathered to mourn. Jesus weeps at the death of his friend, at the grief of the family. It is all so real, and so common, part of the ordinary lot of humans to die and to grieve the deaths of those we love. Jesus has come into the midst of that, fully experiencing the pain of it, showing us how to be truly humanly compassionate.

When Jesus talks with Mary and Martha, it is clear that they already recognize him as God's own Messiah. They know that God is at work, but the work of this narrative is to make things even clearer, for them and for others.

So Jesus, filled with grief, comes to the tomb, as if to weep over the body as any of us might do at a graveside. But then he does something utterly unexpected. He calls Lazarus out of his burial cave.

Lazarus was dead, four days dead, but is not dead anymore. So the stone is taken away from the tomb and Lazarus, "the dead man," walks out, all tangled in his death wrappings. And Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go!"

Here we see Jesus as Emanuel, God-come-among-us, able to command the *Ruach*, God's life-giving Spirit. Life is restored. Relationships are restored.

Hope and life, given by God's *Ruach* are what keep us from despair, from paralysis. God in Christ is clearly saying, "I give life. I am life. Turn to me, trust in me, cling to me. And you will have my *Ruach* within you. You will have hope and joy and life, no matter what appalling circumstances threaten to overwhelm you, even death."

Death is not the end. Love is stronger than death. Love is what created everything. Love is what breathes life into us and sustains us in being. Love is what holds us together in community. Love cares about each and all of us. That great love we see for Lazarus, for Mary and Martha – that same Love exists for each and every person living today. Each of us is loved in our uniqueness – no matter what sins we have uncovered and failed to repair in our Lenten disciplines. No matter how discouraging our circumstances. No matter how hopeless our world seems, lost in the grip of violence and greed. No matter how dry our bones. No matter how cut off we may be from our plans and dreams.

We are loved. And that great Love that breathes us each into being can also unbind us from despair, from the crushing weight of other people's disapproval, from rejection, from failure of any sort, from overwhelming odds against us. Love wants to unbind us and let us go. And this is what we offer the world.

God is everywhere and always ready with the divine *ruach* to breathe into us life and hope and courage, and says to us, too, "Unbind them and let them go!"

All the people we encounter who are bound by despair, by blindness, by hopelessness, by poverty, by circumstance, by fear, by persecution and rejection – we are called to "unbind them and let them go" by welcoming them into the Beloved Community, by putting flesh on their bones with food and fellowship, by recognizing the pain and beauty of each unique person, by doing everything we can to build a world of hope and inclusion and compassion, the Kingdom of God right here and now, empowered by God's *ruach*.

We are invited to find that Spirit among us for the life of the world, to find ways to move beyond our fear-filled ego-centered culture into a life of compassion, courage, and hope, as a prophetic community praying with Ezekiel, "Come, O *Ruach*, and breathe on these slain that they may live." Amen.

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