

### **Time of wondering: dead flowers**

What can you tell me about the flowers here in this vase?

Are they alive or dead? Why are they dead? Can we make them alive again?

Would it make a difference if we took the flowers out of this vase and put them in this vase of water? What would have to happen for these flowers to be alive again? Is that scientifically possible? So what should we do with these dried out flowers? Have you ever heard about a person who died and came alive again?

Today, we are going to look at two different resurrection stories: one is a vision, or dream that the prophet Ezekiel had, and the other is the story of a very close friend of Jesus.

### **Reflection**

Aside from the obvious candidates of Jesus, and Lazarus, and a sprinkling of other biblical characters, have you ever known anyone who came back to life after being declared dead?

I do; nearly 40 years ago, a woman was brought to the hospital unresponsive and in cardiac arrest; her heart had stopped working altogether. The medical staff in the emergency department at the hospital worked and worked and worked on her. Our prayer chain, at the church we were attending, was notified immediately, and many of us were praying for her recovery, even as the ER staff were giving up hope that they could revive her.

You see, there is a window of opportunity within which you can medically work on someone before the brain starts to die, and they had worked TO and past this limit. So, they stopped their resuscitation efforts and called time of death. Staff began tidying the area.

Then they heard it - a heart beat on the heart monitor.

A heart beat AND breathing had started without medical help.

The staff couldn't believe their eyes and ears. But she was alive and breathing and miraculously, she had no brain damage, and went on to live nearly another 20 years. No one doubted that they had witnessed something miraculous! But that isn't how things usually happen is it? I guess that's why it's a miracle.

There is a certain finality about the death of a living being; it's hard, it's sad, and it can leave a yawning gap in our souls. In our extended families, when the last auntie or uncle has passed from the generation ahead of us, we say things like, "well, that's the end of another era." We long for life, and energy and purpose to

our days, however many we are blessed with. And it isn't so much that we mind GETTING old, we hate FEELING old. We don't appreciate our world getting smaller and smaller as aging takes its toll physically and or mentally. And people who do live to a ripe old age, experience the death of their loved ones and their generation over and over again until it is their turn to pass into the next life from this. We lose our loved ones, or we are the ones that others grieve. Aging and death on a personal level are hard, very hard. Even with belief in a resurrection from death, and the promise of Heaven, it's still hard.

We hear about death tolls due to climate disasters, like storms and floods and wildfires, as well as due to wars, famine, and disease. And we have seen or at least heard about indigenous culture and language loss, as well as nations losing their moral imperative.

When we hear about nations losing their way, it might be a news story, but it's not a NEW story to us. History is filled with stories of death and destruction, as well as triumph and overcoming.

And so is the Bible.

The Old Testament is filled with one account after the next of the people of God losing their way, turning from God, resisting God's call to repentance, but eventually returning to God after a period of captivity and exile, or extreme political unrest, or famine or other disasters.

We see from our Old Testament reading today, that Ezekiel is sent to preach to God's people during one such era. In this case, the people are in exile in Babylon, and they have so lost their way spiritually, that all human hope for their return to God is lost. They might as well not be alive anymore. They seem to be finished, as far as being God's people is concerned.

When we look at the imagery in Ezekiel, the picture that is painted for us in words is both fascinating and disturbing. It reminds me a lot of the scene in Lord of the Rings, where Aragorn goes under the mountain to raise up the army of the dead. At least that's the picture I get in my head, when I hear this scripture reading. You may have quite a different picture in your head. Zombie apocalypse anyone? In any case, the idea of a valley filled with bones, isn't one that I really relish, and in fact, it was probably rather horrifying to Ezekiel.

To give some context to Ezekiel's vision, it's important to understand the burial customs of the day. It was required that ALL people who had died, whether rich or poor, friend or enemy, be buried, either in a cave, or in the ground. It was a final kindness to the person who died, and was a custom that was expected to be followed no matter who the deceased was. If the body was laid in a cave, then a year later, the family would return to the cave and gather up the bones into a stone chest called an ossuary, and the ossuary would be placed in a niche in a burial cave. So these bones, that Ezekiel sees strewn all over the valley floor, are the bones of the utterly despised - they were never buried and were left for carrion to feast on- the very worst possible treatment of a dead body.

So what might this vision of Ezekiel's mean?

Let's start by looking at the back story:

The introduction to the book of Ezekiel tells us that Ezekiel is prophesying to a people in exile as well as those still living in the land of Israel, and they love to come out to hear him preach. And in my mind, I can just imagine what they might say, after hearing Ezekiel: "wow, that guy sure can preach, eh?" or maybe, "Well, he sure isn't boring to listen to - he had my full attention from beginning to end!"

And yet, even though many come out to hear Ezekiel, they don't put any of his words into PRACTICE. They are only **entertained** by his preaching. They aren't getting any closer to God, and they aren't growing, spiritually. Their hearts are stone. They are as useless as a pile of sunbleached bones on the desert floor. And Ezekiel knows it. And still, when God says "preach", that's just what he does. His preaching is spread over a number of years, during which he prophesies about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, which does come to pass during those years.

Back to Ezekiel's vision: I wonder what goes through his head when God asks him if the bones in his vision are able to live. What is the "right answer" - the answer that God is looking for? Obviously the bones are dead, so, "No" is the obvious answer. And since they are the bones of the utterly despised, do we even WANT them to come back to life? But God is all powerful, so maybe "yes" is the better answer.

Ezekiel chooses the diplomatic answer - "Only you know, God" And in his vision, when he preaches to the bones, they do indeed, come back to life.

We hear from our scripture reading that the bones begin to rattle around, join together to make skeletons and then get covered in muscle, tendons and skin, and one would assume vital organs and so on, but not be alive yet. Ezekiel then commands the wind to come from the four corners of the earth and the bodies come alive - a whole army of them!

There are a number of different ways that this scripture might be interpreted. An interesting interpretation that I heard this week was that the rebuilding of joints and the addition of muscles and sinews and skin, is like the process of building knowledge and faith. That the more you know, the more you are hungry to know, and that as you know more and grow more, you become stronger in your faith and more resilient. And if we take that analogy one step further, then God breathing life into us is our rebirth, when we take the things that we have heard and put them into practice.

Others interpret this scripture passage as one that prophesies about resurrection, and that may also be the case, but upon studying the commentaries there's another interpretation: this is a prophecy to give the people of God hope - not just hope of resurrection, but hope that when we have wandered so far away from God, our life source, that we might not be able to sustain any spiritual life anymore, that all is NOT lost.

When the people are unable to bring themselves back to life, spiritually, God steps in, with grace, and does what we ourselves are unable to accomplish. It is God who is the author and finisher of our faith and our life! This resurrection prophecy reminds us that life is a God-originated and God-sustained affair.

Now, to more fully understand how our Bible readings are linked in ways that go beyond resurrection, remember again, that during the 40 or so years that Ezekiel is prophesying to the people, the temple in Jerusalem is in fact destroyed. We know that within 40 years of Jesus' earthly ministry ending, that the second temple is also destroyed. So it's not hard to understand the fear that the people have in both eras, of losing that which is precious to them.

So now, we fast-forward the tape to around 30 AD, or CE, however you like to measure time in our current era. Lazarus, a very dear friend of Jesus, is terribly ill. And sinking. And his frantic sisters send word to Jesus that his friend is ill, and they expect Jesus to come swooping in to save the day, by healing their brother.

Now there is a LOT to unpack in this story, and time will not permit an exhaustive runthrough of everything there is to say, but we do want to take some time to look in-depth at a few things.

First, let's look at Jesus' response. Is it overstating the case to describe it as negligent nonchalance? Certainly Jesus doesn't seem very worried about the whole situation, for not only does he NOT hurry to Bethany, he stays where he is for another two days. The disciples are perplexed at first, but Jesus reassures them that Lazarus' illness won't end in death. The messenger likely returns with the news that Jesus isn't coming just yet, but not to worry because Lazarus won't die, only to arrive at Bethany to find that Lazarus has in fact, died.

And Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, are completely crushed. Their best friend has let them down when they needed him most. That they are angry and disappointed when Jesus finally does show up, four days too late, is completely understandable. Mary doesn't even bother to go out to greet Jesus until Martha tells her that Jesus has asked for her.

I find it interesting that even though Mary and Martha both exclaim that Lazarus wouldn't have died if Jesus had been there, they don't ask him why he didn't come. Maybe they understand that his life is in danger if he does come. I wonder if they aren't mostly just crushed by the fact that the messenger returned with the news that Jesus SAID that Lazarus wouldn't die, and then he did anyway. It must have felt like a tragic mistake to them, and even some of the mourners who were there stood in judgement of Jesus' actions, by dismissing his distress over Lazarus' death by saying, "well, it didn't have to be that way - if he had just shown up, Lazarus would have lived."

But wait.

Like the story of the bones in the desert, there is a context here that we don't want to overlook. When we look at the previous chapter, Jesus is preaching in the temple, and the authorities try to stone him to death after Jesus claims very boldly that he is the son of God - utter blasphemy in the sight of the religious authorities. However, Jesus eludes capture and goes into the wilderness on the other side of the Jordan. While he is there, many people come to see him and bring their sick friends and families for Jesus to heal them. We don't know specifically how long Jesus stays in this region, but it's clearly long enough that

Mary and Martha know where to send the messenger to fetch him. So the authorities are angry about Jesus claiming who he is, and they are actively trying to find ways to get rid of him. The disciples seem to be aware of the danger that Jesus is in, because when he decides to finally go to Bethany, which is very close to Jerusalem, Thomas bravely speaks up and says that the disciples should accompany Jesus and share in his certain death. And off they all go.

The other piece of information that we don't want to overlook, is that we know that Jesus has raised people from death before- Jairus's daughter, and the Widow of Nain's son. But there is an important distinction here: Since the people of Israel bury their dead the same day that they die, Jairus's daughter had just died, while Jesus was on his way to the house to heal her. And when Jesus brings her back to life, he does so by taking her hand. In the account of the widow of Nain, the procession is on its way to the burial, so again, the son has just died that day, and they are on their way to bury his body.

In this case, Jesus tells the young man to live, and he does. Many people believe then that Jesus is the messiah. So Jesus has performed this miracle of raising the dead to life before- and not just once. And has increased his following.

So what is different this time?

Four days.

The people of Israel at the time, believed that a person's spirit did not leave the vicinity of the body right away, but hung around a while. So when Jesus brings Jairus's daughter and the widow's son back to life, he is calling upon the spirits to re-enter the bodies they have just left. So, yes, miraculous, but not outside of the belief system of the people.

Lazarus has been dead and in the tomb for four days when Jesus finally arrives at the burial place outside Bethany. He's dead. His spirit isn't hanging about anymore. Lazarus's soul, we believe, is in Heaven.

And Jesus calls him back.

In front of everyone who is there to mourn his passing and be a support to the sisters.

And the Lazarus who comes out of the burial cave? He's still wrapped for burial. He's got his finest clothes on, but he's been covered in linen, including his face. This is no prank. There was a big rock covering the entry to the grave cave. No

one had gone in. No one was secretly bringing water and food to Lazarus. He was dead and gone. But upon hearing Jesus' voice, his spirit reenters his body, and he comes out of the grave, healed. We aren't told how Lazarus feels about being called back, but we can surmise that maybe he isn't too upset, because in the next chapter he's throwing a big feast where Jesus is the guest of honor.

When we continue to read in the chapter, we know that the religious rulers were terribly upset. So upset, that we read in the next chapter that not only do they think that they had better erase Jesus, but they plot to kill Lazarus as well. So there's some irony for you - the man who comes back from four days of death due to illness, is now in danger of death again, this time at the hands of the religious rulers.

But why are they so upset? Are they not thrilled that Jesus has such amazing power from God that he can raise someone from death who is 4 days in the grave? After all, Jesus has basically proven that he is who he said he is - the Son of God, the anointed one, the Messiah. But that's not what they are looking for from Jesus. He is becoming too powerful for the religious right here. Jesus is playing at being God, in their view. They are afraid that Jesus is going to collect such a following that there will be an attempted overthrow of the Romans, under whose rule the nation of Israel was currently living. The religious rulers are afraid that they will lose any religious freedom that they currently enjoy, and they are worried that the Romans will destroy their nation, and their temple - that they will lose everything that they have gained in the past 100 years. So, no, they cannot have a messiah, especially one who they feel plays at being God.

And that's language we understand in our own day, isn't it? The first time a sheep was successfully cloned - remember Dolly? Well, the scientists were accused of playing God. The first time IVF was successful, yep, the nay-sayers were all over that too - the scientists were playing at God.

We can so quickly dismiss the things that make us uncomfortable as Christians especially when those things challenge the social norms and status quo that we have become comfortable with.

We are happy enough to follow a Jesus who walks with us and heals us and is a warm friend, but we struggle when we are challenged by that same Jesus. We wrestle with giving up power to actually make a bigger table where all are truly

welcome. We wrestle with the concept of what a successful church is, remembering how full church was in the Sundays of our past, and feeling perhaps those were the glory days. Like Mary and Martha, we sometimes feel disappointed with God - our prayers aren't answered in the way we were hoping for. And sometimes, like the disciples, we feel like following Jesus is risky. But that Jesus, the risky one, is the Jesus of the bible.

So here we are, on our Lenten journey, and Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday loom closer. To be followed, of course, by Easter!

And we have seen, on this journey, of Lent 2026, that Jesus isn't afraid to put expectations upside down: on the mountain of transfiguration, once Jesus is finished speaking with Moses and Elijah, he encourages the disciples to keep quiet about this amazing thing that they have witnessed and to return back down the mountain to get back to work; on Ash Wednesday, we are encouraged to do our Christian good works in a way that is helpful, but not ostentatious; we've seen Jesus go out into the wilderness once he receives his calling, and there he discerns the nature of his call - a servant, not a warrior against the ruling Romans; we witness Jesus teaching a pharisee, Nicodemus, about what is necessary to follow Jesus, as well as Jesus stating pretty clearly who he is, and why he has come; we see Jesus not only speaking to a woman in Samaria, but then staying in that village for a few days, preaching to them, and creating a following there; last Sunday, we heard again how Jesus loves us in all our diversity.

Time after time, Jesus doesn't do what the customs of the day demand. In fact, he often does the very opposite. And if Jesus isn't upholding systems of oppression, maybe his definition of success is also different from what we've been taught to believe. And so a little introspection is needed here, when we think about who we are, today, as the church, on our Lenten journey.

Wealthy? Not by wall street standards... but we have enough to share....

Mega-super church?.... Hardly, but we DO have a caring community...

Young and beautiful?..... A smallish percent of us, but then again, perhaps we need to count young at heart and beauty on the inside that shines out....

Reflection March 22 2026

A massive choir? Not so much, but we DO make a joyful noise and for those of us who are in the choir, it fills our bucket to sing....

Lots of fundraising work to do? Yes!

Do our small contributions help? Well, if you listen to the mission and service stories, you know we are helping to make a difference. And when you hear TODAY'S mission and service story, you'll know that even our little efforts on the local level are changing lives.

So as we approach Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter, remember that your love always makes the world a better place, that you can't solve ALL the problems in the world, but you can change SOMEBODY'S world with your compassion and courage to build a bigger table and invite more people to be a part of this community, in WHATEVER way they are able. Have courage; follow where Jesus leads, and in the coming weeks remember that he arrives gently on a donkey, walks to the cross and dies in utter humiliation, but rises again victorious on Easter morning!

Praise be to God! May we hear God's call and answer in faith and action.