

LENT 5 Year A

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Ps. 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

St. Paul's Church

Port Townsend, Washington

Sunday, April 10, 2011

The Rev. Canon Janet Campbell

Dry Bones rattle together;
A dead man emerges from the grave . . .

Strange . . .
Here we are on the 5th Sunday of Lent,
and we're surrounded by resurrection . . .

as if new life just can't wait any longer
to happen.

[THOSE DRY BONES . . .]

God shows the prophet Ezekiel
a valley full of dry bones.

“Can these bones live . . .?” asks God.
“You know,” says the Prophet . . . “I don’t!”

“Prophecy to the bones” . . . says God.

“Yes, bones,” says the prophet, “you can live.”

And with a great rattling and clatter
the bones reassemble themselves . . .

It’s such a familiar story
we almost miss the surprise of it,
the shock!

Can you imagine
actually seeing such a thing?

Sinew, muscle. . . fleshing out the bones,
bodies they become . . .

Can you imagine . . .

And then the breath . . .
the Spirit of God
breathes the bodies
into life.

A sign . . .

“This is a sign,” says God,
“that I can and will bring new life
to my people Israel . . .

“They sit in exile,
completely cut off from homeland,
community,
even, they think, from me . . .
their bones dried up,
their hope lost,

but I can and will restore them.
I can and I will.

New life.

LAZARUS

has been
in the tomb for 4 days . . .

but Jesus says,
“Take away the stone.”

Into the fetid darkness of the open tomb he calls . . .
“Lazarus, come out!”

Another familiar story,
but can you imagine
being there with Mary and Martha,
and their friends . . .

Can you imagine actually seeing it?

The dead man,
wrapped in grave cloths,
blindly lurching
out of the cave,
reeling and staggering toward the crowd . . .

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

Aghast, agape, trembling, terrified,
not sure at all what they will find,
they unwrap him,
and they see the glory of God,
Lazarus, alive!

A sign . . .

“This is a sign,” says Jesus,
“so you may believe
that I have come from God,
from the God who gives life
and restores to life . . .

“the God who can and will
bring new life . . . “

RESURRECTION

The ultimate sign
of God's power for life
is the resurrection of Jesus . . .

It does seem strange to be talking resurrection
in Lent . . .
but that's where we're going . . .
from Lent
 through Holy Week
 straight to Resurrection.

Our Lenten disciplines,
our prayer,
fasting,
study,
works of service and charity . . .

are leading us
toward God's gift of Easter –
the renewal of our baptismal life,

No matter how dry our bones,
no matter how deep our despair,
no matter how frail our hope,
we have seen these signs of God's promise
through the window of this 5th Sunday of Lent.

[SHOW THE ICON]

This is a copy of a 16th century icon called the Harrowing of Hell.

It reveals the promise and the problem of Easter.

The promise, and the problem.

Icons are not so much paintings to be looked at, but windows to be seen through,

windows into heaven, they are often called, glimpses into the spiritual reality at the heart of the world – the real reality in which we live and move and have our being.

This icon shows the Risen Christ breaking down the doors of hell, raising the dead from their graves . . . starting with Adam and Eve.

Sometimes new life is a hard birth . . .
and this icon shows us that truth.

Adam both reaches toward Jesus and resists . . .
does he prefer the confines of his tomb
to the unknown that has descended upon him . . .

Jesus has to grab him by the wrist
to yank him out of there.

Eve, on the other side,
is in an imploring posture . . .

Does she want to be pulled out, too,
or is she pleading with Jesus
to leave her in the safety ,
the comfort,
the familiarity
of where she already is?

[THE PROBLEM OF EASTER]

As much as we yearn
for restoration,
what new life asks of us
is sometimes very hard,
and we resist.

We might prefer to stay in Lent
rather than move on into Easter.

The people of Israel,
did return to their homeland . . .
how wonderful,
and yet how difficult . . .
so much had changed.
The old stories,
lovingly preserved
 through the generations of exile,
didn't match
what they found.

You really can't go home again . . .
because, when you do,
home is different,
and life is different,
and you are different.

You have come out into a new place,
where you have to learn new things
and new ways.

Lazarus,

returning to life . . .

a second chance at living . . .

how wonderful,

and yet how difficult . . .

surely there was no back to normal for him . . .

after the experience

of dying

and coming back to life . . .

surely his friends, even his sisters

would see, and treat, him differently . . .

he and they would have to find the way

toward a new normal.

Things would change,

in ways both wonderful

and strange.

[CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE]

I had my own experience
of changing things
at a recent conference I attended.

There was a booklet for all the worship services,
it was very slick,
slicker than I could ever produce:

Morning Prayer,
Noonday Prayer,
Evening Prayer,
Compline,
Eucharist . . .

The worship was as carefully
and thoughtfully put together
as the booklet,
a combination of familiar forms
and new ways
I would never think of.

So much was new
that the liturgy didn't seem like home . . .
I felt like a stranger in a strange land.

A pall of inadequacy settled over me,
the newly minted Canon for Liturgy
of our diocese.

Was I already obsolete?
Had I become a dried up liturgical fossil?

Was my unsettlement
just fear that liturgy,
and the Church,
 might be leaving me behind . . .

Was I stuck in my own liturgical box,
unwilling
to be stretched
by an experience
that might offer me
 new life in my worship,
 growth in my vocation?

I'm not finished
with those questions yet . . .
I need more time to live with them.

I wonder if my experience
was something like
what some people experienced
when the current Book of Common Prayer
was published in 1979.

[THE BCP]

A child of the liturgical renewal movement
of the 20th century,
that book
was and is an invitation
to the Church
to a renewed, reinvigorated
worship life.

Ever since the Last Supper,
liturgy has been changing . . .
it's the living practice
of a living body –
the Body of the Risen Christ—

It develops and changes
as the Body develops and changes
and moves through time.

Liturgy is like a ship
sailing through the centuries,
its hull accumulating barnacles and seaweed
until its shape is obscured and distorted.

The liturgical renewal
put the ship of liturgy into dry-dock
and scraped off all those accretions,
restoring our worship
to its earlier, simpler, clearer shape,
and the Church
to smoother liturgical sailing.

It returned us to our center,
to the essentials that
make us who we are
as the Christian people of God:

Baptism,
our dying to self
 and rising to Christ,
our incorporation
 into the Body of Christ,
 the priesthood of all believers.
the ground of all ministry,
 lay and ordained.

Eucharist,
the celebration
 of Christ's self-offering,
our participation
 in that offering
 through our own offering of ourselves,
to be, like the Bread,
 taken, blessed, broken and shared
 for the life of the world.

Eucharist,
our holy meal,
food for the baptismal journey,
our communion with Christ and one another
 and all who have come before us
 and will come after.
a foretaste of that heavenly banquet
 that awaits us.

Worship as the work
of the entire community assembled,
with the priest and deacon,
acolytes and readers and prayer leaders,
singers and musicians,
ushers and altar guild and Eucharistic Ministers
as servants of the community's celebration.

Holy Week and Easter
as the center of the Christian Year,
with liturgies that
make present in us today
the power of Christ's Passion,
drawing us into Easter
and the joy of his resurrection.

It took time to settle into
all this renewal,
and to see its ripple effects
in the life of the Church.

So many worship spaces,
like yours,
reflected the theology prevailing
before the liturgical renewal,
when they were designed:

a theology of sacrifice without
the balancing theology of shared meal . . .

a theology that reinforced
individual piety
rather than the corporate endeavor
of common prayer . . .

a theology that saw the work of worship
done by professionals
for the sake of the gathered people,
rather than done by the whole assembly
for the sake of the world.

Just as our homes tell visitors
 who we are,
and, when we return after a tough day
 at work or at school,
 just as they remind **us**
 who we are . . .

so does this Church home
tell visitors about the community
 that worships here,
and about the God
 you encounter here.

so does this Church home
remind you who return here
every Sunday,
who you are and what is your call.

What is the message of the changes
in your worship space
you are trying out
in Lent and continuing into Easter?

Can the beautiful old bones
of this dear building
support the new life
envisioned by the Book of Common Prayer?

When the wind of the Spirit
blows a newcomer to these doors,
and she dares to peek inside,
does she see that
there might be new life here,
new hope,
living water,
for her?

There's a baptismal font at the entrance now . . .

A sign:

It says:
there are people of the living water here,
only now it's Lent
and the font is filled with sand,
and the people are waiting, waiting,
for the rush of new, pure, baptismal water
at Easter.

Will she join you
in that waiting?

From the font
she can see the Altar/Table
covered with fine white linen,
candles lit for a banquet . . .
near the middle
 of the gathering of God's people . . .

A sign:

It says,
"Come, bring your offering,
bring yourself,
for Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us,
and there's room here for all,
therefore let us keep the feast."

Will she join you at the table?

The Book of the Gospels is here,
on the Altar/Table;
and now they are visible
from where you are sitting,
you can **see** them both:
signs of Christ's presence
 in Word and Sacrament.

And all around the room,
the people of God gathered,
the assembly,
the Body of Christ . . .

A sign:

the risen and living presence
of Christ in the world.

And children are members
of this body,
because here is a place for them,
when they arrive after Church School,
a place in the front,
where they can see.

New life . . .

Yes, these bones can live!

Sometimes I wonder if change
is an experience
of the absence of God . . .
because God is waiting for us in a new place . . .

and we have a hard time
leaving the old place to go there.

It takes courage to venture into the unknown,
as you are doing
with these daring changes
in your space.

It takes courage
to clasp the extended hand
of the Risen Christ,
and be lifted into Easter.

Amen.