

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Year A, RCL
March 29, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Gospel:
John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 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, "Father, 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 bound 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.

Old Testament Ezekiel 37:14

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We just heard two of the Bible's most powerful stories, each filled with incredibly vivid images of death. In the first, the prophet Ezekiel is brought by the Lord to a valley filled with dry bones. And the Lord, through Ezekiel, commands the rattling bones to come together, and grow sinew and flesh and skin. And the four winds breath life through them and a multitude of these newly recreated beings stand on their feet.

And in the gospel reading, Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, and well-loved by Jesus, becomes ill and dies, and lies in the tomb four days before Jesus finally arrives on the scene. And Jesus orders that the stone covering the tomb be rolled away and despite the protests of Martha about the stench of the dead body, Jesus cries loudly, "Lazarus, come out." And the dead man, feet and face bound by strips of cloth, emerges from the tomb.

As we are told in the story, Lazarus had not simply fallen asleep and, therefore, just in need of awakening. He was stone, cold dead and already stinking. The kind of transformation illustrated by a

story like this, requires death - death to an old way of being, and then, rebirth.

And those rattling bones, scattered on the desert floor, as fearsome as they may sound, represent the pathway to new life.

The acceptance, the embrace of death, is at the heart of Christian teaching. As Jesus said in Luke, "Whoever wants to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake shall save it." or in John, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies, it shall yield a rich harvest."

The mystic and Episcopal priest, Cynthia Bourgeault, tells the story of a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called "Getting All You Can out of Your Shell." There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acorn-opathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped “out of the blue” by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And couched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he said, “We . . . are . . . that!”

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: “So tell us, how would we become that tree?” “Well,” said he, pointing downward, “it has something to do with going into the ground . . . and cracking open the shell.” “Insane,” they responded. “Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn’t be acorns anymore.”

We must die to an old way of being, before we can be reborn to new life in Christ. The old “I” is the acorn and we operate under the illusion that that is all there is. When all along, inside is the potential to become something miraculously new.

All of us know that caterpillars undergo a transformation into moths or butterflies. We have all studied in elementary science classes, or observed first hand, how the caterpillar, when it is time, weaves a cocoon around it’s soft, fragile body

and eventually emerges from the cocoon as a very different and beautiful winged creature. I imagined that the caterpillar, while still inside the cocoon, retained its basic shape, maybe adding a hardened shell and sprouting hidden wings. What I didn't understand, until recently, was just how radical the transformation really is. It seems that once the caterpillar is nestled safely inside the cocoon, the caterpillar melts. It dissolves into what some scientists call a cytoplasmic goo. The cells in its body break down into something resembling neither the caterpillar, nor the butterfly, but soup. And then, miraculously, this liquid gelatin-like substance, is made over, resurrected, into the multicolored world of flying creatures.

But for such a radical transformation to take place, for a crawling, worm-like creature to develop wings to lift it above its, sightless, earthbound existence, it had to die to an old way of being. It had to become a substance akin to the primordial soup, from which all life first emerged, and be born again.

A core teaching, found within the Sufi tradition is that if you are to truly live, you must die before you die. As the Sufi poet Rumi has written,

The mystery of "die before you die" is this. That the gifts become after your dying and not before.

Except for dying, you artful schemer, no other skill impresses God. One Divine gift is better than a hundred kinds of exertion. Your efforts are assailed from a hundred sides, and the favor depends on your dying. The trustworthy have already put this to the test.

Dying, before you die, involves an act of surrender, letting go. Through spiritual practice we learn to die to the false self. It is possible to let go of attachment to money or prestige, to let go of striving, fear, anger, even sorrow, when it is time. Spiritual practice doesn't begin on the deathbed. It begins by practicing surrender of the things that don't matter, surrender of the things that do you harm, not later, but now. We are called to become good at dying.

The Lord, in calling on the prophet Ezekiel to prophesize to the bones, makes it clear that the bones are the people of Israel. Ezekiel is addressing a people who have been taken away from their homes and are living in exile in Babylon. By allowing his spirit to move among them, he gives them hope, and offers new life – not just as individuals, but as a people of God.

And remember that shiny collection of self-indulgent acorns lying at the foot of the oak tree?

By allowing their shells to crack open and to fall beneath the earth, the promise is held that what will emerge from the ground is not just a solitary sapling, but a forest of mighty oaks. We are called as a people to die before we die, so that we might truly live.

We are making this journey through Lent together. From Ash Wednesday, with the ashes on our foreheads reminding us that we are dust and to dust we shall return - on through Holy Week, where we will be confronted with the darkness and death of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. It is a symbolic journey that carries us beyond death onto the new life of Easter morning, but first we have to die.

This Lenten journey we are making together is darker and more foreboding than usual. This is not just the Lenten season, but the season of the Coronavirus. This particular season brings with it the literal death of who knows, ultimately, how many of our fellow North Fork residents. And the virus brings with it a kind of collective death – a death shared by us all. But it also brings with it, the opportunity for all of us to die to an old, tired way of being. New life awaits us.

Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."