

Body and Spirit
Ezekiel 37:1–14; Luke 24:36–44
Saturday, April 23, 2023 (Easter 3)

Let us pray: Risen and ever-living Lord, raise up your word in us, that it might lead us to new life, in Christ. Amen.

Ten years ago this past Friday – April 21, 2013 – I preached my first sermon here with you all. *Ten Years*. They call it a “candidating sermon,” and it’s basically preaching for your job. After worship ended, there was a congregational meeting – an *uncomfortably long* congregational meeting – while Jen and I waited over in the Carriage House with our kids. A vote was held, and you called me as your pastor. We came back into the sanctuary, and the bell was ringing, and everyone was clapping. It was a *celebration*, the culmination of a *very long process*, for both me *and* you.

It would have been really easy after that to just say, “Okay, that’s it! We’re done! You have called me, and we can all take it easy now. The work is over.” But *we* still had to go back out to Nebraska and tell people we love very much that we were leaving. We still had to pack everything up and sell our house. *You* still had things to do here to get ready for me to come back and start about a month later. That celebratory day ten years ago was the end of *one* part of the journey, but it was also the beginning of something entirely *new*. You had called me as your pastor, but I wasn’t your pastor *yet*. It was this weird in between time. And then I *got* here, and the work just started. It was *another* new beginning. And there have been *other* new beginnings all along the way over the past ten years.

I was thinking about that this past week, because that’s kind of how Easter works. We have the big celebration of Christ’s resurrection on Easter Sunday. The sanctuary is full of people and

lilies. The music is *big* and the singing is *loud*. It is such a joyous, festive day. It would be really easy to leave here after Easter Sunday worship and say, “Well, that’s it! It’s all over now. Christ is risen! The work is done. We can all take it easy now.” And plenty of people *do*. But Jesus isn’t done yet. The work is just getting started. He spends the next 39 days with his disciples, teaching them, eating with them, preparing them for what is *next*.

Easter is a *season* in which we *continue* to celebrate that Christ is risen. In one sense it is the culmination of a very long process – three days in the tomb, three years of ministry, 33 years of incarnate life, centuries of hoping for a messiah, and an eternity of God’s plan to redeem creation. It’s the end of a very long process, but it also marks a new beginning. The work of the *church* is just getting started – bearing witness to the risen Christ and his saving death. It’s this weird in between time in which Christ is risen, but things aren’t over yet. And they were *supposed* to be.

The way that first century Jewish people understood death and resurrection was that when you die, everyone goes to Sheol, the place of the dead, the place where *all* the dead – good *and* bad – go to rest until the last day. On that last day, God would raise *all* of the dead, and there would be a judgment where the righteous go to be with God and the unrighteous do not. But it wasn’t just *one* person rising from the dead here and there. It was *all* the dead rising *together*. So when *Jesus* rose from the dead, people thought, “Well, here we go! The dead are being raised! The end of the age is here!” But it obviously *wasn’t*. Christ is risen...but we’re still waiting. Resurrection wasn’t the *end* of it all. It was just the *beginning* of something *new*.

So in this season of Easter, what does it mean for us to experience resurrection? There are a couple of different ways of understanding and experiencing resurrection, and we see them reflected in our two scripture readings today.

Almost 600 years before Jesus rose from the dead, the prophet Ezekiel had a vision. The people of Israel had been attacked and conquered by Babylon. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, a lot of people had been killed, and others (like Ezekiel) had been sent away to live in exile. It was a time of utter hopelessness and despair for the people of Israel. Ezekiel is called by God to proclaim God's word to the Jewish exiles in Babylon; to reassure them of God's abiding presence with them and give them hope that God would bring them back home and restore them.

Ezekiel is brought out by the spirit of the Lord to a valley. And the valley is filled with bones. *Dry* bones, so they had been there for a very long time. Now, what we have to recognize right away in order to understand Ezekiel properly is that this is not a *literal* valley filled with *physical* bones. Ezekiel is having a vision. He is "in the spirit." God is showing him something, revealing something to him that presently is *not*. This is *symbolic*. God says at one point, "These bones are the whole house of Israel." We know it's not *literally* the whole house of Israel, because many of the Israelites (including Ezekiel) are still alive. These bones *represent* the people of Israel, who say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost."

God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live again?" Ezekiel says to God, "*You* know." And God tells Ezekiel to proclaim God's word to the bones, to say, "I will cause my breath to enter you, and you shall live." Ezekiel *does*, and the bones start rattling. Then they start coming together. They are covered with muscles and skin. But there's no breath in them. So then God tells

Ezekiel to call forth the *ruach*, the Hebrew word for *breath, wind, spirit*, the life force of God. And the *ruach* comes and fills the bodies, and they *live*.

Then God says to Ezekiel, “Now go back and say to the people of Israel, ‘I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, and I will bring you 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.’” Now, has this literally, physically happened? Were the graves opened and the people of Israel who died in Babylon brought back to Israel? No. It *may* one day, but it has not happened *yet*. But were the people of Israel raised from the dead and brought back home? Yes, they were. They were given a new hope and a new beginning. They experienced resurrection, not in the *physical, bodily* sense, but in the *spiritual* sense.

And *we* experience resurrection in that same way. When we are at a dead end, without hope, and then *something happens*. God *acts* to bring about new possibilities, a new beginning, a new life. We find the *healing* that we need – physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally. Forgiveness is extended and received. A relationship is mended. We’re able to laugh again after the loss of someone we love. We’re able to break free from the bonds of addiction or depression or abuse. God raises our spirits up out of the graves of despair and gives us *hope*. That is one of the ways that we experience resurrection – a *spiritual* resurrection. Author Shane Claiborne writes, “We can tell the world that there is life after death, but what the world really seems to be wondering is if there is life *before* death.” Can these old, dried up, lifeless bones live again? And the answer that God gives is a resounding, rattling, “Yes they can.” Not just *one day*, but *now*.

When Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples, and Luke says that “they were terrified and thought that they were seeing a *ghost*.” The Greek word there is *pneuma*, which

also means, “spirit, breath, wind,” just like the Hebrew word *ruach* that Ezekiel used. The disciples thought that this was a *spiritual* resurrection. But Jesus says to them, “Look at my hands and my feet. *Touch them*. A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” Then Jesus asks them if they have anything to eat. A strange question, with an even stranger response. They give him a piece of broiled fish, and he takes it and eats it in their presence. Because *ghosts* don’t *eat*. *Spirits* have no need for *food*.

Jesus’ resurrection is *concrete, tangible, physical, material*. Touching and eating and seeing. Flesh and bones and fish. This is *bodily*. Jesus is not a *ghost* or a *spirit* or a *vision*. He is *alive*. It’s not just that his *spirit* has been raised and his disciples have been given hope in the midst of death. It is not metaphorical. His *body* has been raised, and because of *that*, we have hope in the midst of death. Christ has conquered death and opened the way to eternal life.

This is another way that we understand and experience resurrection. Not just *spiritual* but *physical*. One day we will die. And in one sense, that is the culmination of a very long process. But it is also a new beginning, because we will go on to live a new life with God. And on the last day, when God’s kingdom comes to earth, God will open up our graves and raise us from the dead so that we can *physically, bodily* dwell forever with the Lord.

So two ways of understanding and experiencing resurrection. And so often, we focus on one or the other. We either focus on *spiritual* resurrection or *physical* resurrection. Every year around Easter, I hear pastors talking about their Easter sermon, saying, “This year I’m going to focus on the physicality of resurrection; the promise of life after death,” or, “I’m going to focus on the spirituality of resurrection and how can we experience that now.” Or I’ll hear Christians say, “I

believe in a *spiritual* resurrection, that God can *metaphorically* bring about life in the midst of death. But I'm not so sure I believe in a *physical, bodily* resurrection of the dead.”

We talk about it in terms of either/or. But resurrection is not either/or, it is both/and. We experience resurrection *both* spiritually *and* physically. Our ultimate hope is in the physical, that one day we will rise from the dead to live forever with God. But until that day comes, we experience the *spiritual*. God raises us up *spiritually* until God raises us up *physically*.

So the good news is, however you need to experience resurrection, you can. If your spirit is dead, God can raise you up. If your body is dead, God can raise you up. Wherever you are anxious and afraid, where you need healing and hope, God can bring about life in the midst of death. Jesus Christ is our living promise of that. He is, Paul says, the first fruits of those who have died. He gives us a glimpse, a taste of what life will be like for the rest of us.

If we continued reading on in Luke's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, “You are my witnesses of these things.” A witness *sees* something but then also *tells* about it. We witness, and then we *bear* witness. And what we bear witness to, what we *tell* the world and *show* the world around us, is the new life that is possible in Jesus Christ.

That we can live without fear, because we trust that in life and in death we belong to God.

That we can live *generously*, because we trust that God provides for our needs and makes life possible.

That we can *forgive*, because we have been forgiven.

That we can love one another – even our enemies and those we disagree with – because when we were far from God, God came near to us in love and broke down the dividing wall between us.

That we can work for justice and righteousness in this world, affirming and embracing the humanity of *all people*, loving *all* people, because we are *all* made in God's image, and God has breathed the same breath of life into us *all*, and when we dehumanize and discriminate and destroy (or stand by idly and allow that to happen), as we do to the least of these, we do to Christ himself.

We are called to embody the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and show the world that a new way of living is possible, and indeed it is *here*. That God is at work, now and forever, bringing about life in the midst of death. Christ is *still* and *forever* risen! So let us bear witness to that in body and in spirit. Amen.