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## **“Finding Life among the Tombs”**

**A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**Third Sunday in Lent (Year A)**

**March 23, 2014**

**Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-6, 17-44**

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There comes a time in every person’s life when she or he is confronted by something that cannot be wished away, willed away, worked away, purchased away, hoped away, or prayed away. Hemmed in by circumstances beyond our control, we are at a stalemate in life. The sense of helplessness that attends such experiences often gives birth to deep despair when our systems of denial break down.

Some of us here today, perhaps many of us, maybe even you, have your back against a wall. No escape, no way out, you are boxed in by some situation or condition. We have come face-to-face with the reality of our very human limits.

James Michener has written: “It takes courage to know when you ought to be afraid.” It is ironic that fear is the condition for both courage and hopelessness.

Today we have two texts which address situations of complete resignation and despair, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. Ezekiel spoke to a nation that had descended from the heights of a glorious history and pageantry in its political and religious life. Now in ruins, both the monarchy’s palaces and the temple in Jerusalem’s were toppled plundered. The princes and priests of the land were carted off to Babylon as captives, and all that remained was smoldering rubble and the leaderless poor. Surely the end had come for Israel in this time of judgment. The nation had abandoned the worship and ethical

demands of their God, and the remnants of this scattered and dispossessed people faced certain extinction.

From a nation's predicament in the Old Testament, we shift to a very personal story in the New Testament. The Gospel of John tells about Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, all of whom were fervent followers of Jesus. Lazarus has taken ill, and his sisters send word for Jesus to come and heal his friend. But Jesus delays for some unexplained reason. And when he finally arrives, Lazarus has been dead for 4 days. Mary and Martha believe the adage, "While there is life, there is hope." But their hope now lies buried in a tomb. Their despair is summed up in Martha's bittersweet words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Seemingly the providence of God has led to this point of no return.

Have you been there before? Are you there now? By the choices you have made or by the luck of the draw, are you confronted by an insurmountable obstacle that looms as large as a tombstone in the dead of night? Do you look out on a valley and see only the bones of a life cut off from the source of vitality and meaning?

Where do we go in such moments? Where can we go, and what do we do?

These stories from Ezekiel and John point us to an unchanging reality that exists whether we perceive the evidence of it or not. That reality is the constant care, love, and compassion of God for His people. One of the purposes of these stories is to remind the people of God that the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. God does not simply abandon us to our just deserts or to fate. God yearns to give us purposeful life and vital meaning within the limits of our human sphere.

The first question and answer of the *Heidelberg Catechism* provides us an understanding of this reality:

**"What is your only comfort, in life and death?"**

*"That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he*

*protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation.”*

The loving embrace of God will hold us, not only in the future, but holds us *right now* – in our present darkness, even before we know of God’s compassion, before we understand the purposes of God, before we experience his redemption and resurrection power.

So first the reality of God’s love and good intention for us exists prior to our perception of it. As a matter of fact, our situation may appear to contradict this reality. Yet the truth is we have not yet seen the whole story.

Before my older son reached the tender age of 21, he had buried two of his three best friends. Not only was my son a best friend of these young men, I was the pastor to their families. The mother of one of these young men, a woman of great faith, has struggled through the years with the death of her son. Her faith has remained strong, but she has gone through some dark days.

In one of these dark periods, we talked. Part of the struggle encompassed the question of why? And of course, I could provide no persuasive or credible explanation, and I didn’t try. The only thing I had to offer was a listening ear. As a woman of faith, she did not focus long on the question of why this happened; she shifted to the question of purpose and meaning, on what might come out of this terrible loss. Again, I could only listen to the questions.

The mother is an interior designer. I offered her an image that did not explain anything but it did reflect where we are in this life. I said, “I believe there is a purpose for our lives, but it is unseen. It is like a tapestry weaving where all we see is the back side with threads and strings going in and out with what appears to be no rhyme or reason. What we don’t see is the front side on which there is a beautiful design that makes sense of all the pieces that we have not been able to put together.”

She responded: “I’ve been struggling with how to weave my faith into my work; I think you have helped me do that.”

A contemporary songwriter has captured a similar thought through her words:

“Somewhere down the road, there are answers to the questions,  
Somewhere down the road, tho’ we cannot see it now,  
Somewhere down the road you will find mighty arms reaching for you,  
And they will hold the answers at the end of the road.”

[Amy Grant, “Somewhere Down the Road”]

Supplying and grasping answers in our present despair brings only cold comfort for those in loss. Maintaining the possibility of meaning within a caring relationship can bring hope even if we don’t have certainty.

In addition to hope in the promise and presence of God, there is a proclamation of God’s word, a word that changes the course of events, a word that alters reality and our perception of it. It is a word that takes a valley of dry bones and builds of it a living and vital community. It is a word that calls forth from the depths of death – *life*, life that is to be unbound and set free.

Not anyone can utter that word of liberation. It must be initiated by the very God who with a word created the heavens and earth. That word is consistent with, and comes through, the saints and prophets of the Old Testament, and finds its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ, the word made flesh. It is through Jesus that we see the perfect intention of God’s will, the depths of God’s love, the length of God’s mercy, the culmination of the purpose of all creation to be one with its Creator in joy and praise. And it is not by accident that Jesus, the word made flesh, also confronted death and the tomb. Jesus is the one to whom we must go to find direction and meaning, purpose and renewal, life and hope, especially when we are confront by the power of death.

And finally, because of the reality of God’s good intent for us, and the proclamation of that intent which transforms life, we have the capacity to live *within* the circumstances of our lives.

Paul the Apostle provides an example of the capacity to live within the circumstances of life. Remember how Paul made a desperate plea to God to remove what he called a thorn in his flesh? And the answer he received was, “No.” And along with that answer came this word from God: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

So Paul embraced this troublesome situation of his life, and concluded: “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest on me... for when I am weak, then I am strong” (II Cor. 12:8–10).

Brothers and sisters, remember – because of God’s everlasting love, because of God’s word of promise, because of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, because of the Spirit’s renewing power – our failures, our disappointments, our losses do not have the last word!

The tombs and the valley of dry bones, in the hands of God, are the beginning of God’s remarkable work of life and hope!