Sermon - The Fifth Sunday in Lent, A  
The Reverend Dale T. Grandfield  
April 2, 2017

Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Psalm 130  
Romans 8:6-11  
John 11:1-45

A forensic detail: “there is a stench.” Four days dead. Dead - this is not play-acting. The post-mortem processes of decomposition were well under way; the early hours of death’s paleness, coldness, stiffness, settledness had passed, and the body prepared, the funerary rites said, and locked away in the dark subterranean realm of the tomb, under the immobile protection of a stone, Lazarus putrefies: all of the indicators that the life that once bonded his elements together has gone are clear. There is no mistaking the situation.

He has begun to stink. No coming back from this level of deadness. It is final. Lazarus is gone. Death and time won.

Death is a powerful mystery. You’ll hear people like me who sometimes spend time with people when they die talk about the experience of being with someone as they die as being on Holy Ground. That’s really the only way to make meaning, I think, of something that is so wholly uncontrollable. It is strange - if that’s what we mean by holy - entirely strange. And yet completely native; simply the final and visible working-out of our own inherent entropy. “We are mortal,” as the Prayer Book says, “formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return.”¹ And, as we marked you with ashes a few weeks ago, we reiterated it to you: “you are dust and to dust you shall return.”²

It seems to me, if you asked most people what the central message of Christianity is, they would say love. In Episcopal circles, love is a central theme: Jesus’ Summary of the Law, God is love… we speak of love a lot. God loves you.

Sometimes I think, though, that we may have lost sight of the fact that the fusion that feeds God’s loving heart is living. God is life. “Self-fed, self-kindled like the light,” says one hymn, “changeless, eternal, infinite.”³

Jesus standing at the dark opening of the tomb, looking in to see if his eye will acclimate, the smell of death touches his nose and he breathes in fits, disgusted, nauseated, a shock to his system, and yet he stands and lifts his eyes to heaven and thanks his Father, and calls to Lazarus: and there, on a day in a small town in Palestine, the ultimate inertia of death - the claim of this entire universe as it slows on and

¹ BCP, Burial of the Dead: Rite Two, p. 501  
² BCP, Proper Liturgy for Ash Wednesday, p. 265  
³ O Love of God, How Strong and True by Horatio Bonar, stanza 2: “O Love of God! How deep and great, far deeper than man’s deepest hate; self-fed, self-kindled, like the light, changeless, eternal, infinite.”
on into coldness and darkness and collapse, there - in the darkness of the tomb is Lazarus, alive. The clock turned back, the stench washed from the air, the settledness, stiffness, coldness of death’s days overcome and Lazarus inhales loudly, surges, pushes himself up, comes out:

Behold the man, Jesus, who not that long hence would be hanged on a cross and asphyxiate to death, derelict and forsaken, laid rotting in his own three-days tomb, dark and cold and pale and stiff and dead. Death would try again: death would try because death is the very goal of everything we know, it is the universal truth - but even death, even that deepest spell, writ in the immobile stone of the universe’s aging structure cannot overcome the life in the heart of God that not only supplies, but redeems.

For a short period it seemed that even God would lose to death, that Jesus was powerless in his own tomb, and at the entrance of Lazarus’ that Christ was too late. Yet, 16th Century Anglican divine John Donne wrote: “As west and east in all flat maps… are one, so death doth touch the resurrection.” Death itself, for God, is the stuff of resurrection. And the Church itself, telling the word from generation to generation is the truest evidence of Christ’s having passed through death to life, transformed.

In his Second Symphony, Gustav Mahler embarks on what seems to me to be one of the finest explorations of death, redemption and resurrection in the entire scope of human Art. As the Symphony nears its conclusion, Mahler sets a poem by an 18th century German poet. “You shall rise, you shall rise, my dust, after a short rest!” it says, but Mahler, unsatisfied with the poem’s scope, broadens it: “believe, my heart, believe, all is not lost for you…” As he creates his world of sound, the composer brings both orchestra and choir to a climax, with the words: “I will die in order to live! Rise again, yes, Rise again, you will, my heart in an instant! What has won over you now will [in fact] bring you to God!”

Ours is a faith in the Resurrection, a faith based on the counterintuitive idea that, in order to redeem the sad mortality of creation, in ultimate love God godself became a creature and died. And death in the furnace of that tomb… changed into life.

So take heart, friends, that despite our deepest existential despair, we know God is more persistent than time, evil, and death, and that together with Lazarus, everything we have gone through will be redeemed and we shall be brought by God’s infinite life into the transformed joy of our Lord’s Spring.

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4 “Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness”by John Donne.
5 “Die Auferstehung” by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock: “Auferstehen, ja auferstehen wirst du, Mein Staub, nach kurzer Ruh!
6 Symphony No. 2, Movement V by Gustav Mahler: “Glaube, o glabe, mein Herz, alles ist dir nicht verloren”
7 “Sterben werd’ ich um zu leben! Aufersteh’n, ja aufersteh’n wirst du mein Herz in einem Nu! Was dir geschlagen wird dich zu Gott tragen!”
Other works consulted


