

April 2, 2017 – Fifth Sunday of Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 11:1-45

Bones, Bodies, & Belief

You thought you were coming to church, instead you are at a creep show. What strange and even gruesome readings we have here today: The prophet Ezekiel has a vision in which he's in a graveyard, but not a proper one, not a cemetery where the bodies of the dead are tucked into the earth, but a mass, open grave, where nature and its creatures have plucked the flesh off clean, leaving only dry, bare bones, left out to dry in the sun. Ezekiel stands in the midst it, of a silent scene of carnage.

Jesus is in a graveyard, too, but a noisy one, arrived at after a series of digressions. Jesus is not spirited there, he makes his way with confounding delay, arriving to the sound of wailing and weeping: from the dead man's sisters, and neighbors, and then from Jesus himself, the death fresh, so very fresh—though not the body. Its rapid demise is now outpaced by the relentless progress of deteriorating flesh; a body once smelly with illness, is now wrapped up, stopped up into a tomb, to keep out the stench of death—so the dead man's sister reminds Jesus.

What strange stories you have to come to hear. What a strange thing to come here at all. There were any number of other things you could have done this morning, but you came here to hear stories of death and decomposition.

I decided to try Advanced Biology my senior year in high school. Maybe you are now expecting now to hear a story of dissection, a frog or fetal pig, to picture their deadened flesh and exposed bones. You may already be smelling the formaldehyde, but I think that's still too antiseptic an image. I'm remembering my course in Advanced Bio because it included an out of class assignment: gathering and labeling natural specimens, a scientific collection. Leaves were one option, but for that you needed a minimum of fifty. Another type of collection had a much lower threshold: four. Well, that sounded much more doable, I thought, I could manage that. You only needed to have four—if you did a skull collection. Now though this did take place in rural Minnesota, I wasn't a hunter, I didn't look through the sightlines of a rifle, I looked at the sidelines of the highway: for roadkill. I was not out to hit anything; I looked for creatures that were already dead. If my siblings were with me in the car I'd have them look, too, which crept them out a little. This may creep you out a little: how I'd seen one, pull over to the side of the road and inspect it. If the head hadn't been mangled, I'd maneuver the corpse it into a trash bag and stash it in the trunk, take it home, decapitate it, skin it, boil it—not a good smell—immerse it in bleach and leave it out in the sun. I remember I used too much bleach for the squirrel head, its fine bones almost disintegrated into dust.

They were very dry, those bones, they were very dry, like the bones that Ezekiel sees—but that was not a paltry collection but piles of them, and they were very dry. God asks Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” And Ezekiel answers: “O Lord God, you know...”

I am struck by this answer, which does not seem a response of complete and personal conviction. It may have an evasiveness to it, “O Lord God, you know ... may include an unspoken, “I don't know...” could be something of a dodge, like doing a collection that requires a measly, messy, four instead of a meticulous fifty. Ezekiel's first response is tempered, or tentative, not altogether sure, at least, not sure in what he knows, what he himself can see.

It reminds me of the response we heard last week, from the man born blind. Last week we had another, very long healing story, also which includes all these digressions, and the man ends up ostracized, dead to his community. Jesus arrives late in that story, too. At the very end Jesus returns to the man, who can now see, who is looking, clearly, clearly he is looking right at Jesus, when Jesus asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” and the man says, “Who is he?” Again, not the most assured response. Not as if, having received his sight, the man stands up and recites the Apostle’s Creed.

And then there’s this week’s long gospel story. There are the disciples, who are understandably confused, even after Jesus speaks to them plainly. There’s the aside from Thomas, a disciple not known for his confidence and conviction. That story of doubt comes later, but already here Thomas sounds sarcastic, or defeated, or both, “Let us also go and die...” Then there are the dead man’s sisters, who are wild with grief, whose confident “Lord if you had been here” have an unspoken, “but you were not.” There is Martha’s bold testimony, “Yes, Lord I believe,” but just a few breaths later she tells Jesus to remember the stench, to hold his breath...

Such strange stories of faith: faith that is tenuous, ambiguous, ambivalent, angry—and vital. Ezekiel, the man born blind, Thomas, Martha, and more—fragile as they are, they flesh out what it means to believe. Their responses, their stories, their selves, are sinews that knit together bones of faith, bones into which God breathes. God is the agent, the inspiration, the author of life and faith.

We come here to hear these stories, strange as they are; we come here to be with other characters who are not in the Bible: you and me, strange as each one of us is, as siblings in a car. We come here because it is not just animals that are run over and left at the side of the road. We come here because life is smelly, and bodies get sick, and we have stood beside graves, and in Valleys of Bones. We come here because we are bodies, and parts of a body, part of something larger, something that our senses tell us does not make sense—except that it does. The fragility of flesh, the limitation of what we see and are and know, are also testament to something more that we know, more that we sense, more that we can be. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.”

Not in ourselves, but in the God who calls forth life, calls it out of the dust, out of tombs, and mass graves, and even us.