

Lent 5
10 April 2011

Ezekiel 37:1–14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6–11
John 11:1–45
Year A

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Death. We don't like to talk about it. We use euphemisms, like she's gone, or he passed away. Even when there's an open coffin in the funeral home, people like to say that she looks good.

Product lines make an enormous amount of money selling age-defying creams, or promote a moisturizer that will take years off your life.

We don't like to tell anyone our age, as if by saying it, it will declare us old. And when we do, we look to be complimented about how we look "for our age." And people are living longer, aren't they? I'm fifty, but as everyone knows, fifty is the new forty. I saw a cartoon once set in a graveyard, with a bunch of headstones, where one epitaph read "dead is the new ninety."

Take a breath. Take a deep breath. Know that you are alive.

Take a breath. Take a deep breath. Know that one day you will breathe your last breath.

During the roar of the AIDS crisis, Michael Farrell spoke about our participation in life and in death like this:

Every breath we breathe is a finite number away from the last. They are part and parcel, this breath and our last, the same river that later runs into the sea.

*We have been conditioned to see it otherwise. We think, **this** is life and **that** is death. We love and hate and plan and play as if there were no tomorrow in which we won't figure—trying to whistle past that bigger graveyard.*

Along came AIDS, death with a different mask, defying us to look away.

--from "There's Life after AIDS, Some Who Have It Say," Michael J. Farrell, in the *National Catholic Reporter*, May 13, 1988. Quoted in *Death: A Sourcebook about Christian Death*, edited by Virginia Sloyan (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, © 1990), p 95

Valley of dry bones, mass graves, dead man Lazarus, friends who have succumbed to AIDS, bodies yielding to Hurricane Katrina, millions slaughtered in the Holocaust....

Sons and daughters with their lives taken from them in earthquakes and tsunamis, grandmothers wilting in old age, children who are ravaged by disease...and us.

We might not think so, but like Ezekiel, with Mary and Martha, we are walking among the dead.

We might not like say it, but as much as we are alive now, we are also in company with dying.

Take a breath. Take a deep breath. Every day, 16,000 children die from hunger related causes. That's one every five seconds, about two breaths.

Death Valley. That's all Ezekiel saw. It was on his radar, it was in his face, this epidemic of exile sucking the very life out of the promised people.

That's all Mary and Martha were dealing with. Their brother was taken away from them. And it affected the whole village of Bethany, which means "house of the afflicted." Can you imagine anyone naming their child Bethany, *house of the afflicted*?

In the Gospel today we are walking with Jesus, who knows about Lazarus' death, who grieves his friend as he feels it in his gut, who weeps, and who very soon will face his own death, which is the final sign in John.

You know these signs, don't you? Don't you remember when Jesus speaks about living water to the parched woman of Samaria drawing water from Jacob's well in the heat of the day? Don't you remember the videotapes running that announce new sight to those who are blind, even as Jesus brings sight to the man born blind? Well, by raising Lazarus, stinking already because he has been buried four days and is most sincerely dead, Jesus is resolutely heading toward Jerusalem to face his own demise. Jesus might as well have said to Lazarus in the tomb, "hey friend, move over! I'm coming in!"

But instead he breathed the words "Lazarus, come out," bringing his old friend back to his sisters, back to his community, releasing him from his exile, joining him to life again, pointing to the life that lasts, the great sign.

Take a breath. Take a deep breath. Consider the Spirit, who biblically is also known as wind or breath, and is in you. Think about the grave cloths being peeled away. Think about Lazarus, who was raised, breathing again, but who still had to face dying again.

And look at death, facing our own death and dying, as Lazarus had to do. In our baptism, though, we are invited to a second death. This second death is like Jesus' own on the cross, in that it brings resurrection to the life that lasts. In baptism, we are given new breath through the Holy Spirit that Jesus gives out on the cross, and after his resurrection.

While many defer, deny, and defy death, we who share company with the baptized include Jesus' death into our own biographies, and might write on our own epitaphs: "died with Christ, and raised with Christ."

While we walk among the dead, while we ourselves keep company with the dead, we with the Spirit's breath see in it the path to new life. Death does not have the final word, instead the Spirit of the living Christ does: "come out" "unbind him," "let her go."

Join in the walking toward Christ's cross and empty tomb. Announce with your words and your acts of hope that death does not defeat, but through Christ with Christ in Christ we breathe the Spirit of life.

In January of 1997, living in Rutland, Vermont, Kari and I already had the name picked out for our yet to be born daughter, Bethany. Yes, we knew it was a town adjoining Jerusalem housing Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Yes, we liked the name, and liked others who shared the name. What we did not know was that Bethany would be born in the midst of tragedy. A few weeks before Kari was due, we learned that Kari's father Ervin Henkelmann died after being hit as a pedestrian by a car who ran a red light. Kari's obstetrician said she would not advise her to travel, but added that if it was her father she would surely want to be with her family, so the doctor wrote a note to let us fly from Albany to Detroit. Well, Bethany didn't wait long. She was born on the day of Erv's funeral, January 25.

There is much more to tell, but here's the story in a nutshell. We couldn't get Bethany discharged until she was examined by a pediatrician. Knowing no one, we took the advice of nurses and secured a doctor who was a rabbi's son and, as it turns out, also had gone to rabbinical school. This doctor/rabbi's son/former rabbinical student knew what Bethany meant in Hebrew, *house of affliction*, and acknowledged as much, but spoke to us in what to us sounded like prophecy to dry bones, "you know there is an alternate translation, which means *house of God*."

And Kari and I knew in that moment, that the Spirit of the living God, the breath of the Spirit, the wind of new life had been blown in through that doctor's words, that our daughter was *house of affliction and house of God*, and we were released to consider life in the midst of death and to share that with our grieving family and any to whom we would tell the story.

Take a breath. Take a deep breath. Hear the word of the Lord:

You shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from my graves, O my people. I will put my spirit upon you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Let us pray.

Come, Holy Spirit, breathe on dry bones. Release us from our fears, bring us to die and rise through your story of life and death and life again. By the great sign, birth us again into the life that lasts, through with and in Christ who unbinds us from our grave cloths, and who join us together, bone to bone, flesh to flesh, with the community of the baptized, eager for Easter.

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.