

Sermon Easter Sunday, March 31 2024

We were standing on an overlook, near the Hebrew University and looking down on the Old City of Jerusalem. Bishara, our guide, pointed out a little cove in the wall of rocks just off to the left, on a clear sightline to the Garden of Gethsemane. “Do you know what that is?”

It was small, perhaps two feet high and three feet wide, just what looked like a hole in a wall of dirt and rocks. We guessed but couldn’t come up with the answer.

He smiled and said, “It’s an ossuary niche.”

We looked clueless, so he reminded us what ossuaries were. They were places where the bones of someone who had died were placed. As we looked closer, we saw that there were many of these niches. This one had artifacts in it that dated it to Jesus’ time, over two thousand years ago.

The burial practices in Jesus’ day were to inter the body in a place where it was safe from scavengers, but where all that would be left after a year or so was simply bones. The rest of the organic matter was gone to dust. At the end of the year, the family would return and put the bones into a small casket, and inter those bones, with a marker of whose bones were within, into one of these niches.

In essence, the body was turned into a pile of dry bones, and only the bones were given a permanent resting place. No skin on those bones!

So when we hear today of the Marys and Salome going to the tomb to put spices down on the body of Jesus as it began its time of slow departure of skin from those bones, think as they would think – at least the Lord would be surrounded by pleasant aromas of spices like frankincense, and if the cave wasn’t

sealed tight, no one would be disturbed by unpleasant smells as the natural process progressed.

In those days, people did not keep a big distance between themselves and death. There were no funeral parlors. There were just relatives who prepared the one who had died. Seeing a dead body was not unfamiliar, and caring for that body was an act of love. They knew that they would see what was left in a year, and then they would take the bones and move it to an ossuary niche just like the one we saw in the hillside. It was a natural process. It was sad but it wasn't frightening. They had encountered death so many times before.

When they got to the cave, they were surprised to see the stone rolled away when they arrived there. They worried that some animal had gained entrance and had desecrated Jesus' body.

But what they found was stranger than that. No sign of Jesus' body. In its stead was a person dressed in a white robe. He clearly wasn't a Roman – this was not the garb of a Roman. He wasn't one of their fellow Jews – no one they knew could afford a fine pure white garment like that. And before they could say a word, the person spoke.

“Don't be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He's not here. He's been raised. Go tell Peter and the disciples to go to Galilee and he will meet them there.”

What did it mean to them, this phrase “he's been raised?” Didn't they see him killed? They had been prepared to see his dead body, as painful as that would be. They had been prepared to return in a year's time to retrieve the bones so they could be put in a stone ossuary chest and stored in one of those niches.

But there was no body. Not a corpse. Not a pile of bones. Nothing but a strange person in a white robe with an even stranger message.

Just..gone. And they were terrified.

Now you and I both know that when someone says “don’t be afraid,” it’s because there is something scary going on. So it’s no surprise that in their fear, they didn’t tell anyone, at least the way the evangelist Mark tells the story. In later gospels, they do tell the disciples, but in Mark, not a word, at least not immediately.

They simply had a word from a stranger that he was raised and that he was coming back. The stranger said “Jesus already told you this would happen,” but in their traumatized state they couldn’t comprehend that.

But Jesus kept his promise. He was raised from the dead. He had conquered death. He would meet them in Galilee.

His body was not gone. It was not just a pile of bones. He was alive, and he came back. He kept his promise.

In Mark’s stripped down version of the story, there’s no fancy interactions, no doubting Thomas, no Mary Magdalene in the garden wanting to touch him as he fends her off. Just the barest of facts: he had been crucified, he was now alive, risen from the dead, and he would see them again.

If the women had wondered as they walked to the tomb what their lives would be like now that Jesus was gone, now they were completely undone. There was nothing to compare this with. The disciples, once they finally learned of this and encountered the living Jesus, had to figure out what this meant, what they would do, how they would do it. It had been hard enough to imagine Jesus’

mission as a failure that ended on the cross. This was something ridiculous, and yet it was true, and it was up to them to continue the work that Jesus started.

As it is up to us to continue the work, two thousand years later.

If we think of that old burial practice of laying the body to rest until only the bones remain, and then putting the bones in a box and storing it somewhere, what this story is about is something that is the exact opposite.

Jesus died, his body should have done what all dead bodies do, and yet he rose. He came back to life. Last night, at the Easter Vigil at St Paul's, we heard Samantha read the strange and wonderful reading from the prophet Ezekiel called "The Valley of the Dry Bones." The prophet speaks of a vision in which he sees a great dry plain of bones, and a voice, presumably the voice of God, says, "Mortal, can these bones live?" A strange question, because it is clear that the bones haven't been part of a living person in a very long time. The prophet says "Only you, Lord, know that." And he is commanded by God to prophesy, to preach the word to the bones, and when he does so, the bones start to reassemble, muscle and sinew and skin reattach, and the bones do come back to life, filled with the breath of God.

It is a foreshadowing of the miraculous thing that happens that we celebrate today, Jesus being raised from the dead, this reassembling of that which appeared to be beyond repair. Skin on bones.

We ourselves know the miracle of coming back to life, of skin covering dry bones and new life beginning. We ourselves may have thought that we as individuals or we as a parish had been reduced to dry bones. Some might have predicted the death of this parish, as we wrestled with conflict and unhappiness. But here we are, on this glorious morning, in a church full of people rejoicing in

worshipping in this space. We have learned much and we have remembered what values shape us as a faith community. We are alive!

Yes, this is all true.

I know you're waiting for the "BUT" here. Instead, I'm going to give you an "AND!"

We are not dry bones in a dusty corner. We are alive, and we are called to continue the work we started, so that we might stay alive, in this building, in Petersburg, in God's world, and especially in Christ.

Because when Christ was resurrected one of his messages to his disciples was this: there's work to do to continue spreading my teachings. Go and do it, because there is no greater mark of resurrection than this: that we resurrection people live into our mission and ministry . There is no greater honoring of Christ's resurrection than this: that we continue in our journey to loving each other and loving all in this world more deeply and fully.

And so, for that lesson of love, we give thanks, and for the resurrection life we are called to follow, we say Alleluia!

Amen.

