

Unbind and Let Go  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
John 9:1-45  
March 9, 2008

It is tempting to speak of death and resurrection in metaphorical terms, and in fact that's what I'd planned to do today. But then the events of the last week took place and metaphors no longer work. Sometimes we have to deal with the literal and leave the metaphors for another time. Today is one of those days.

In her book *Speaking of Sin*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Whatever pretty pictures we have painted for our lives, Ash Wednesday parts the curtains so that we can see the brick wall behind. It is the same brick wall for everyone of us which unites us even as it makes our throats go dry. We all come from dust, and to dust we shall return."<sup>1</sup> These are sobering words for this fifth Sunday in Lent. Words made all the more significant and relevant by the this week's tragic deaths of Lauren Burk and Eve Carson, and several weeks ago of Meredith Emerson and Cayle Bywater.

In light of these painful losses, the scripture readings for today take on real urgency. Death for the authors of Ezekiel and the Gospel of John, as for us today, was not some philosophical abstraction; it was real. For Ezekiel, it had been over ten years since the exile into Babylon. The Temple was in ruins; the people had lost everything. The Israel they knew was no more. They had experienced the funeral of their nation, their social community, even for some, their faith itself. And Ezekiel stands in a valley full of dry, dead, human bones – the valley of the shadow of death. It is a place of hopelessness where nothing lives—not a single blade of grass, or the smallest desert flower.

Lazarus had been sick and was dying when Mary and Martha sent desperate word to their friend Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Yet Jesus did not arrive until four days after Lazarus had been put in the tomb. Where was Jesus when he was needed? Where was their friend whom they trusted and knew could have helped if he'd only been there. But it's been four days, and like Ezekiel, these sisters too are hopeless and despairing as they face the irrevocability of their brother's death.

The Israelites must have asked, "Where is God in our exile?" Mary and Martha had to have wondered, "Where is Jesus while Lazarus lies dying?" And we want to know too, where was God on Wednesday morning at 5 am when Eve Carson was killed?

The Israelites believed God had abandoned them to their enemies. Their lives were over, and Israel was now nothing more than a pile of dead, dry bones. Mary and Martha, who looked in vain for Jesus to arrive in time, were left with the recognition that their friend had not come in time; he had not even made it to the funeral. There is perhaps no more heart-breaking statement in scripture, than Martha's lament, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died!" And we, if we're honest with ourselves, have to have asked "Why would God allow Meredith, or Cayle, or Lauren or Eve to die? Why would God allow such absurd loss, such senseless violence?"

Scripture is very clear and forceful that in times of crisis, many people feel the absence of God. There is pain, loss, brokenness and death in our lives. We get hurt; we struggle to find life, in a death-filled world. There are times when the curtain is pulled back and we can no longer avoid the brick wall of mortality. Ezekiel was really in exile and captivity and his nation had really been destroyed. Lazarus was really dead, and Jesus was really late and did not arrive in time. And we too are left with our doubts, our questions, our disappointment, and our pain.

There are those who will tell you that you shouldn't question God. There are those who will tell you that whatever happens, it is the will of God. And maybe that's what they have to

believe in order to deal with it. But that kind of resignation is not biblical! Job cried out to God in the midst of his pain and demanded an audience with the Almighty; demanded that God show up and explain himself! And Jesus, from the cross, cried out to God, “Why?” “Why have you forsaken me?” I believe it was the poet Tennyson who wrote, “There is more faith in honest doubt, than in half the creeds.”

John Claypool, who lost his 10 year old daughter Laura Lue to leukemia, writes “There is more honest faith in an act of questioning than in the act of silent submission, for implicit in the very asking is the faith that some light can be given.” And he quoted from his friend, the great preacher, Dr. Carlyle Marney, who counseled that although he did not have an answer to the suffering of the innocent, he fell “back on the notion that God has a lot to give account for.” And Claypool concluded, “I am honoring God when I come clean and say, ‘You owe me an explanation.’ . . . It is not rebelliousness, then, but faith that keeps me from finding any promise down the road of unquestioning resignation. . . . I believe I honor God by continuing to ask and seek and knock, rather than resigning myself.”<sup>2</sup>

Claypool doesn’t fool himself that he’ll ever find all the answers he wants to have. However, he knows that God honors his struggle and his faith; just as God honored Job’s struggle and faith, actually showing up for the conversation Job had demanded, even if God then proceeded to blow Job away with questions of his own.

God shows up for Ezekiel too, and has a question for him, “Mortal, can these bones live?” And Ezekiel answers, “O Lord God, you know.” And Jesus, tardy though he was, finally shows up for the disappointed and despondent Martha, with a question of his own, saying “I am the resurrection and the life . . . Do you believe this?” And she replies, “Yes Lord, I believe.”

Even as these scriptures demand from us the recognition of death in our midst, and even as they allow us to question and to doubt, they also offer us the possibility of hope. They do not leave us among the dry bones and the tombstones; they contain within them the words of life. The vision of the dry bones is a promise of life for Israel. Ezekiel is the one who saw it first, the one who dared to believe that God can bring life in the midst of death. In his vision, God comes to the graveyard of the people, and breathes new life. God’s spirit blows in on the wind, breathing life-giving breath. Bones rattle and come together; tendons and muscles and skin flesh out into new life. The vision is a sign that Israel will be revived. The people of God will resurrect into a new creation as the new Israel. “Thus says the Lord God, ‘I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.’”

Martha is the one who dared to believe that Jesus was more than friend, teacher, and prophet. Even when the disciples who spent every day with Jesus didn’t understand, Martha trusted that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. She walked with Jesus to the tomb, and heard as he called, “Lazarus, come out.” And her brother who was dead, came out of the tomb alive again.

But “Lazarus, come out,” is not the last word Jesus speaks. His last words are to Martha and the others gathered there. He says “Unbind him, and let him go.” Isn’t that interesting? Jesus raises the dead, but we’re the ones who have to unbind them. We are the ones who have to let them go free. “Jesus does the God-work of resurrection, but he tells the mourners to do their part by unbinding Lazarus and letting him go. It is an odd command, if you think about it: why should a resurrected man need any more help?”<sup>3</sup> But, resurrection is not the last act in this story. The last act is unbinding, and God gives it to us, to do on behalf of one another.

For us, both individually and corporately, unbinding and setting free can take many forms for many situations. But, what do these words mean for us today as a community of faith in this current situation? God in Christ has done the work of resurrection for Meredith Emerson, for Cayle Bywater, for Lauren Burk, and for Eve Carson, of that I have no doubt. But,

what does it mean for us to unbind them and let them go free? What are we called to do for them in response to what God has done?

Henri Nouwen writes that the “fruitfulness of our lives shows itself in its fullness only after we have died. We ourselves seldom see or experience our own fruitfulness. . . . But the beauty of life is that it bears fruit long after life itself has come to an end.” and he adds, “If the Spirit guides our lives – the Spirit of love, joy, peace, gentleness, forgiveness, courage, perseverance, hope, and faith – then that Spirit will not die but will continue to grow from generation to generation.”<sup>4</sup>

. Each of these young women, within their spheres of influence, made significant and varied contributions. Each shared with their world of family and friends those gifts of the Spirit God had given to them. And so this is my prayer today, that we will continue to share those gifts that they have given to the world – to be a presence of love, joy, peace, gentleness, forgiveness, courage, perseverance, hope and faith – and in so doing, to unbind them and let them go free.

May it be so, Lord; May it be so.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2000), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, rev. ed. (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1995), pp.69-70.

<sup>3</sup> Ana Carter Florence, “Preaching the Lesson,” *Lectionary Homiletics* (XIX:ii, Feb-Mar 2008), 51.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994) pp. 38-39, 41-42.