

“Resurrection: The Prequel”
Sermon April 1, 2017
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Rev. Leah Fowler

Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-46

Gabriel Fauré’s Requiem is a piece I sang years ago in a choir. A French musician, Fauré composed his Requiem at the very end of the 1800’s, following the words of the Roman Catholic funeral mass. In an interview, Fauré remarked, “It has been said that my Requiem does not express the *fear* of death and someone has called it a *lullaby* of death. But it is thus that I see death: as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience.”¹ When you hear the gentleness of a choir repeating *Luceat eis*, may your light shine forever on them, or choir and violin on the *Sanctus*, you will hear the sweet lullaby of Fauré’s aspiration.

I can assure you that Mary and Martha were not welcoming death as a happy deliverance or a sweet lullaby. Each sister of Lazarus expressed angrily at Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Martha focuses on the very physical, noting that Lazarus’ tomb already stinks because he had been dead there four days. In this story, we see a sorrow so deep that even Jesus weeps. It is an unsettling death; not the stuff of lullabies, or even of the happy children’s song “Dry Bones” that tells of the bones Ezekiel sees in the valley and prophesies to come back together and to life.

In the coming two weeks, we will see Jesus parade into Jerusalem on a colt while his motley crew of followers wave palms and shout Hosanna! We will see Jesus betrayed by a beloved friend. We will see him brought

¹ Orledge, Robert (1979). *Gabriel Fauré*. London: Eulenburg Books p.115

under trial, arrested, mocked, tortured, and executed on a cross. Then we will wait for three days, remembering Jesus' body being as dead as Lazarus'. And on the morning of that third day, with sun rising over Overpeck Park, we will speak those words, "Christ is risen!" It is a ridiculous assumption, and so we need a Resurrection Prequel to show us God can really do this. Lazarus plays that role for us.

A 5th grader at my last church was unsettled by this story and asked me if Lazarus could be considered a zombie. Zombies have taken up significant space lately in our cultural imagination. My wife Chris has drawn me into watching with her *The Walking Dead* and now I like it even more than she does; as for me, that's where my cultural interest in zombies ends. However for Chris, there is that secret part of her that wants to buy the Costco 1-year emergency food supply for 4, just in case there is a zombie apocalypse. And she had her best athletic success ever in motivation to exercise because she found a zombie app on her iPhone, which has an ongoing storyline of various zombies chasing her. She gets points for outrunning her zombies. It has gotten her from the couch to running a 5k and to her big goal of running the Chicago Marathon 2 years ago. Ironically, the zombie app has made her feel more fully alive. An article in *The Guardian* suggests that cultural fascination with zombies could possibly reflect several things: fears of environmental apocalypse, our tendency towards mindless consumerism, and human choice within a disaster: whether to live or die, and at what moral or ethical cost.² Watching zombie shows on TV is a dress-rehearsal, or prequel, for when we imagine these things could happen for real.

So I don't have a straight answer for that 5th grade boy. John's gospel does not go into any sort of detail about Lazarus' post-tomb existence, so I don't know how much he would meet the criteria for zombies, whatever those might be.

² Mary Hamilton, "Warm Bodies: what our love affair with zombies says about us" in *The Guardian*, Feb. 8, 2013

What I do know is this: Jesus is willing to meet us at the boundaries between life and death. He tells Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die.” Jesus meets Lazarus at the entry of the tomb and calls to him, “Lazarus, come out!” Jesus tells Mary and Martha and the small crowd of friends surrounding them to unbind Lazarus from the garments of death, and to let him go.

The gospel story stops short of describing what Lazarus’ life is like after that. We don’t even know what his body is like. But what is important is that death no longer binds Lazarus. He is given a new freedom.

OK, I am just going to assume that at least 50% of you feel some level of skepticism as to whether this story could have really happened. And of those who do believe in the story, perhaps a good portion of you are simply comfortable seeing the story’s truth in metaphor, not as a factual miracle. But if somebody in this room does believe in this story, perhaps it is enough to give any one of us-- believers or skeptics-- new life.

It jumped out at me as I prepared this sermon that **Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life had nothing to do with Lazarus’ faith.** So many stories of Jesus’ healing are of people dragging their broken bodies before Jesus, with a persistent and demanding faith, bringing forth all that they have so that they might be healed. Not Lazarus; he is already far dead. Even if he had the faith, he was already dead and stinking up the tomb. It is Lazarus’ sisters who bring a stubborn faith to Jesus that is strong enough to bring their brother back into life. Jesus does not tell Lazarus “I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me will never die.” He tells Martha. And she and Mary hold the faith when Lazarus is too lifeless to muster up any faith of his own.

Nadia Bolz Weber is a pastor in what some call the Emergent Church Movement. I have quoted before from her book *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint*. In an interview with Krista Tippet on *Speaking of Faith*, Nadia Bolz Weber laments how much we have individualized faith. She says, “I don't think faith is given in sufficient quantity to individuals. I think it's given in sufficient quantity to communities.” She gives the example of a parishioner coming to her about The Apostles' Creed, saying, “I can't say the Creed because I don't know if I believe every line in the Creed.” To which Bolz-Weber replies, “Oh, my God. Nobody believes every line of the Creed. But in a room of people, for each line of the Creed, somebody believes it. So we're covered, right?” She says, “this is Western individualism run amok in religion. It's not *your* creed. It's the *church's* creed and I think we've really lost track of that in this personal me and Jesus, how *I* feel, what *my* piety is, *my* personal prayer life, and we've lost the beauty of — this thing really being about community. It always has been the body of Christ.”

Some of us may feel as dead or depleted as those dry bones in the valley that Ezekiel conjured up. We know people whose marriages feel dead. We know people whose jobs no longer give life, or whose inability to find work depletes their life and hope. We know people who have discovered their bodily decline happens at a faster rate with each year. We know teenagers who do not have hope. Some of us are, or have been these people. We consider the field of bones before Ezekiel that upon his word connected, stood, found flesh and danced. We proclaim the absurd and consider what God might unbind in our lives. Jesus speaks to us, demanding, “Come out!” and we have to boldly consider what that might mean for us.

And even if none of us can today muster enough faith to raise someone from the dead, resurrection is a grace that is bigger than the faith any one of us has. So we cast the tiny bits of faith we do have, or even at least the hope that we can have faith, into the whole of the church, together with

Christians who may individually be cranky, sarcastic, hypocritical, or even just plain wrong. When we do that, we can be transformed from an army of one into a community of love, justice, forgiveness and hope. We cast our tiny bits of faith into the lot of the church, which at this point in time is in need of some resurrection itself as we see steeply declining numbers in mainline, progressive churches-- particularly among young people. We cast our tiny bits of faith into the whole of the church knowing that death for God is the modeling clay for something new, amazing and life-giving. It is absurd; it is hard to believe; and it is true.