

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
5 Lent A; April 2, 2017

Bones and Breath

I still remember my first visit to the Natural History Museum in DC. I don't know how old I was, but I was the right age for dinosaurs. The dinosaur exhibit has been closed for renovations the last few years, but back then it was the featured room. It was just on the right as you went in. You crossed through the door and there was a triceratops over here, a T Rex staring you down from right there, a pterodactyl flying overhead. It was amazing.

I walked around that room and my imagination was on hyperdrive. Those were the real bones of real dinosaurs. It was exciting and terrifying at the same time. It was like I wanted to be there, but I also wanted to get out of there, because I *knew* that they could come back to life any minute. It was like I was a character in *Night at the Museum* decades before the movie came out. That's the power of imagination.

Today's Old Testament story features another collection of bones with even greater possibility. In the story, God grabs the prophet Ezekiel and takes him to a valley full of bones. This is the house of Israel, God says, and it was true: their kingdom was in shambles and they were living in exile. But God challenges Ezekiel to use his imagination. "Prophesy to the bones!" God cries, and after a few moments they start to rattle and shake; they come together and grow muscles and skin and finally with the breath of God they stand upright – a nation healed and restored.

The implication is that God will return the kingdom to its former glory. Someday, their people will rise again. But in Jesus' time, hundreds of years later, the first Christians read this story through a different lens. They understood it not as reviving the kingdom of the past but as foreshadowing a new creation and the everlasting kingdom of heaven. For them, it was about the resurrection, and that brings us to today's gospel.

Jesus' friend Lazarus had died. His sisters, Mary and Martha, run out to meet Jesus on the road. [One sidenote here, thanks to our Adult Forum speaker, Emily Zimbrick-Rogers. Emily pointed out that it's Martha who first runs out to Jesus. We tend to think of the other Mary and Martha story, where Martha is the busy one doing all the work, while Mary sits with Jesus and earns his praise.] But this time, it's Martha who goes to him. "I wish you had been here," she says. "I know that my brother will rise again on the last day, but even now you can ask God for help." That's when Jesus tells her that he is the resurrection; new life is coming into the world through him. To prove it, he raises Lazarus from the dead.

It's a powerful and emotional story. It's a window into the depth of Jesus' relationship with this family. He weeps at their loss and then calls Lazarus out from the tomb. But it's also a tricky story. Let's face it, God doesn't answer this particular prayer very often. It'd be nice to bring our loved ones back, but it seems this was a one-time shot. That makes it all the more likely that this story wasn't really about Lazarus; it was more about setting the stage for Jesus' own resurrection.

In a way, Jesus is teaching them what resurrection is about. It is about the power of love and life, forces stronger even than death. It is, as Martha suspects, about the future – the day when all people will be lifted up and the world will be restored. But, as Jesus shows them, resurrection is also about new life today, here and now. Perhaps not literal new life, like Lazarus enjoys, but new life nonetheless.

Jesus is teaching them that through him resurrection is coming into the world, in ways large and small. Resurrection is happening here and now, if we open our eyes and use our imaginations. All around us, there are what Jonathan Kozol calls ordinary resurrections – every day signs of hope and redemption and renewal: friends reconciled, communities rebuilt, lives healed and reborn. So as we prepare our hearts for Holy Week, for the journey of the cross, let us look for glimpses of resurrection. Even now, God's breath is moving over the surface of creation. New life is emerging. Indeed, it is already here. Amen.