

**“Raised Together”**  
(Ezek 37:1-14; John 11:1-45)

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Once when I was a younger fellow, I went to visit my aunt who lives in Anaheim, California. She gave me a whole book of tickets to the rides at Disneyland and dropped me off at the gate. I was pretty excited about going there for the first time and jumped at the chance. But I never realized until I got there that it makes no sense to go to a place like Disneyland by yourself.

As soon as I got on a ride, it was painfully obvious to me that I was conspicuously by myself. Everyone else was laughing and chatting with their friends in groups of various sizes and having a great time. During the rides they shouted and screamed with pleasure, waving their arms and chattering excitedly. Have you ever shouted and waved your arms around and had a generally great time like that by yourself? It’s a very strange spectacle to imagine.

The more time I spent there, the more awkward and alone I felt. Before I got there, I had only thought of how great it would be to experience all the rides. I could choose any ride I wanted to, without any restrictions; have the run of the park. I just never realized that, the whole thing made no sense without someone to share it with. I think that the same is true of life in general.

My visit to Disneyland happened at a time in my life, when I was just out of high school and with no strings attached. I had the kind of freedom that people long for when they are tied down with responsibilities. I had the kind of freedom that car companies use to appeal to buyers in their commercials, where you see a vehicle racing along some stretch of highway in the middle of nowhere or a track driving across the desert.

So there I was enjoying this freedom, but also aware of a great pit of loneliness and awkwardness inside me. There was no-one living this great freedom with me, no-one to whom I could later turn and say “Remember when we did this?”

One of the things I was learning is that there is a lot more to the experience of freedom than the exhilaration you get from things like driving out on the highway with no strings attached. We tend to talk about this kind of freedom as though it is an ultimate good with no down sides. And we rarely speak of the loneliness and meaninglessness that comes with living for your own pleasure without a thought for others, especially if it goes on for too long.

Ultimately, I think that this kind of freedom isn't really freedom at all.

Instead, it is a bondage to selfishness, confinement to a “tomb” of self interest, that eventually stifles and kills the spirit.

### **In the Tomb of Lazarus**

It's hard to think of being in a tomb or tied up in grave cloths, when you are out there running free without responsibilities and doing as you please, because all appearances are convincing your of the opposite. And maybe what appears to be true is.., for a while. I do think that we all need that kind of freedom sometimes. But when it goes on for too long, if it becomes an idol or a lifestyle, then I think that it becomes something that doesn't smell good.

I don't think it is long before a kind of spiritual stench begins to rise from a person who is bound and entombed by a commitment to this flawed understanding of freedom. People who pass by can “smell” sin, things like self-centeredness. They notice the smell and keep on going, because who wants to be around someone who's life revolves around himself? And life grows more lonely and isolated.

We don't really know what Lazarus's situation was in the Gospel story. The exact cause of his death is unclear. But what is clear is that it is a death and resurrection story that we can apply to our own lives for better understanding. And it is clear that the story is also intended to prepare us

for our own participation in Jesus's death and resurrection. That must be why the reading is chosen for this point in Lent.

The Gospels don't actually give us a moment by moment account of Jesus's own resurrection. By the time his followers get to the grave on the third day, he has already been raised. And so this story fills in that gap for us, at least as far as it applies to death and resurrection as we experience it in our own lives.

It describes the agony of waiting for a deliverance that never seems to come, the experience of being stuck, the way a person can become stuck inside a small apartment, unable to go out into the fresh air and stifled by the suffocating smell of his own fear and indecision, in a room in which the air has been made fetid by perspiration and body odor; the smells of a life in decay. And it describes the irresistible command that finally comes from to us from beyond the grave, to come out. And it describes the falling away of grave wrappings as we stumble forth, back into the light, and into life.

### **Dry Bones**

The Ezekiel reading about the dry bones is paired with this Gospel reading because it is also a death and resurrection story. But unlike the Gospel story, which focuses on the saving of Lazarus, the Ezekiel story is about the resurrection of an entire community.

Ezekiel tells his vision of the dry bones to a gathering of homesick Israelites, who have been forced into exile in Babylon and have now been there for a long time with little hope of returning home to their beloved Jerusalem. Apparently, many of the exiles wondered what purpose there was in continuing to worship God as part of a community in exile. They wondered whether it wouldn't be better to simply assimilate into the local culture.

And seeing that their hope of returning home and their enthusiasm for the community of faith had been drained away, the story tells us that God sent the vision of the dry bones to Ezekiel. It was a vision promising that God would resurrect their community by joining each individual dry bone back into a functioning and living part of a living body, by breathing the Holy Spirit into it.

The circumstances were different, but much in the story holds for us today. Like the people of the exile, many of us also feel somehow separated from where we feel we belonged. Things have changed so rapidly in the space of our lifetimes, that we sometimes feel as though we too are homesick for a world from which we have been exiled. We wonder whether we should just assimilate and accept things as they are or whether we should remain resolute in our faith.

We are also conscious that we are being pulled away from the body of Christ by the seductive charms of the larger empire in which we live. As in Ezekial's time, the more the seductions of the empire draw us in, the more the life is drained from the church, the more the marrow is sucked from its bones, and the tissues of caring that bind it together dry up and disappear.

### **The Lack of Smell**

When you look at the Ezekiel story about the dry bones and the Raising of Lazarus side by side, one of the interesting differences between the two stories is that in the Ezekiel story, there is no odor of decay. And this must be because the people have long since given themselves up for dead. The people in exile have long given up on the hope of being restored to the land which they identify with their salvation. In their cases the connective tissue that binds one person to another has long since been allowed to dry up and disappear completely, leaving them feeling like dried up bones. And when all the tissue has been bleached off the bones, there is not a smell left to detect and all connection is lost.

I think that there are many different kinds of spiritual ailments: workaholism, selfishness, laziness, loneliness, sexual disfunction, alcoholism, resentment, pride, greed, homesickness. But it seems to me that, in every case, the "smell of decay" is somehow related to the decaying of the tissues of relationship that bind people together into

caring community. Fear, distrust, hatred, loneliness and despair and frustration. These are some of the things we can smell in the air in situations where the fabric of a society is in decay.

### **Being Raised Together**

When we first look at the Ezekiel story and the story of the Raising of Lazarus side by side, it looks at first as though the Ezekiel story is about the resurrection of a community and the Lazarus story is about an individual being raised.

But when you look more closely at both of these stories, you find that both stories really about the raising of individuals that cannot be understood apart from the raising of a community. In the story of Ezekiel the breathing of life back into the community lifts the individual exiles from their graves. And in the raising of Lazarus, Lazarus's resurrection is a restoration to life and to a community that cares for and loves him. In both cases, the resurrection of the person and the restoration of community are inseparably related.

I wholeheartedly agree with this Biblical understanding. Although I myself have a strong introverted pull to my personality and draw strength and relief from my time alone, and although, as an American with a strong streak of independence and individualism, I guard my

freedom zealously, I still do not believe that any person was created to live in isolation nor do I believe that a person can save himself or herself, apart from restoration to a loving community. That is not how God works in the Bible.

I fully agree with the Gospel view that, to be fully human, a person has to somehow be reconciled to living in covenantal relationship with others; that we need to be a functioning part of some kind of web of social relationships which is held together by mutual care and compassion and without that, there is a critical part of our lives that is missing. Furthermore, I believe that it is in the joy that we find in nurturing these relationships that our true freedom exists. Otherwise, life becomes the living hell of being in Disneyland all by yourself forever.

When Jesus calls Lazarus out of his death in the tomb, he is also calling out to us, to draw us out of out of isolation and back into caring community. That is why we are here – to be the community of faith and embody the light and the life to which the Lazarus's of this world may return.