

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Year A, RCL (John 11:1-45)
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
Winston-Salem, NC
The Rev'd Lawrence M. Womack
06 April 2014

If asked, what would you say it takes to be fully alive? Not just simply existing or surviving, but fully alive? Howard Thurman makes that point that:

The important thing to hold in mind is that all of our energies must not be consumed in merely getting through the day or the week. In the living of our lives from day to day we must be geared to goals or purposes that inform the character of all our activities. Our living must be structured by what it is that we are trying to achieve with our lives.... What will be the extent of a man's life he does not know—in what time or place he will come to an end is not given to him to know. The wise man, therefore, lives his life seriously each day but does not take it seriously.

(From *The Inward Journey*)

Thurman points directly to a deep truth of our lives, if we are to live them fully: we are to be serious but not too serious with the lives we lead. But life is serious. There are serious things that must be done, there are serious issues with which we must deal, there are serious decisions that need to be made. Life is a serious matter and my life; your life is precious and important – worthy of all the seriousness that we can muster.

And yet, for all of our seriousness, are we truly alive? For all of the good work we do and the successes that we garner, do they make us truly alive or are we not more connected and enlivened and full when we are able to let go a bit?

But to what does this lack of seriousness point? It is not just a silliness and giggling or the exasperated throwing up of our hands and giving up, Thurman's "ease of living"; his lack of seriousness is owed to the enlivening and freeing indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Even in the midst of the difficulties and strangeness of our lives: a vision of dry bones or at the tomb of beloved Lazarus; even in the midst of great sorrow and fear, the Holy Spirit of God helps us to re-member and re-connect with the Spirit that gives us life.

This "lack of seriousness" is not frivolous and not to be easily dismissed. It is an ease that helps us to settle down into the providence of God. It is the sentiment carried upon the words: "Give us this day, our daily bread." It is the trust of young children and the reliance of old friends. It is, in part, the reason that Jesus wept.

At Lazarus' tomb, why would Jesus cry, knowing that he was about to raise Lazarus? Was he overwhelmed by the grief of Martha and Mary? Was he saddened that Lazarus had to endure being buried? Did he weep because he know

there were those in the crowd who would run immediately and tell the Pharisees? No doubt, a combination of these might be true to various extents, but in light of Jesus' comment to Martha: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (John 11:40), might it not be that he was saddened that, even Martha and Mary did not understand or trust that God would act on their behalf? In his previous conversation with Martha:

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Jesus was close with Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He had spent much time with them and they had witnessed miracles at his hand, in their own lives. How could they, of all people, feel that he (and God) would leave them to face their perils alone. Maybe Jesus wondered how much they really trusted him.

Or maybe Jesus saw how powerful the fear of death is for us. Maybe Jesus more clearly understood how the deepest fears of our lives can cause us to forget what God has already done; how they can cause us to lose focus on the fact that Jesus is right with us, telling us the things that will bring us peace and joy. Jesus has just told Martha that her brother will rise again. Jesus had just told her that if she believes in him, she will have everlasting life. Jesus has tried to impress upon her that she does not have to be so fearful, that she does not have to be so sad, that she has only to trust him and believe what he has said.

We are often incredulous or lack the energy to perceive Jesus and believe what he says, when things are at their worst. Our expectations of when Jesus and God should show up and what they should do can also serve to sap us of our energy to trust and believe. We are so focused on surviving the latest challenge that we, can miss that Jesus is right with us – maybe he doesn't look like we think he should look; maybe he has sent a proxy, i.e. an angel to give us the message; maybe

Jesus' message seems to be mis- or ill-timed; maybe what is being said is too far beyond our reckoning as to not even register with us.

When we are dealing with difficulties, we feel less alive: our energy is depleted, our joy is gone. In the midst of those times, what would really give us life? What would re-animate our lives? What would need to change so that we could fully live? We all have answers (some very detailed) about what the solution should look like. What if, in those times, we were able to let go a little bit? What if we were able, without minimizing the import of the situation, take it less seriously. What if we tried relying on our spiritual resources: prayer, reflection, meditation, worship, sacramental presence – putting less energy into how dire things are. It would do nothing to change the outward dynamics of the situation – Lazarus would not come out of the tomb any quicker – but we might gain a sense of ease, even in the midst of the trouble.

An example? Hospice care. About 15 years ago, I had my first experience with hospice, as a volunteer. There were many stories in the Joseph Richey Hospice, but one stuck with me. A woman, well-advanced in disease and in years was brought in, very close to death. Her family and friends and doctors were resigned to the fact that they had done all that they could do. They were not thrilled with the idea of hospice, but it was their last resort. While I never met them, it was reported that there was some feeling of abandonment and guilt on the part of the family. Every indication was that she would not be long a resident of the hospice. A number of years later, she was thriving! Still cared for at the hospice, she had received new life! All around her marvelled at her! She was full of life and energy – not completely well, but so truly alive as to astound! She grew plants in her windows, cared for a bird (or two) and regaled anyone who would spend some time, with stories of her life and her journey. I did hear, several years after leaving Baltimore, that she died, but that her funeral was a true celebration of her remarkable life!

Sometimes when we are at the end of what we can do – sometimes admitting that we are spent and other times being forced let go of what we think we can/should, new life is revealed! When we are able to trust in the power of what God says, even a valley of dry bones; even a man already dead and buried in the tomb four days, can result in new life. Friends, that is what makes us truly alive! It is when we can acknowledge death and the difficulties of this life, but still trust in what

God is saying and in what God has promised, that we are free to live full lives and free to fully engaged in the true joys that are to be found with Jesus at our side.