

I had a conversation with a man this past week who really is struggling with moving beyond being stuck. Something has occurred in his life which he believes to be a final word for him. Life is forever ruined, he thinks. Things can't change. Life is on a trajectory forever shaped by what occurred in the past. Life is forever controlled by death. Death wins.

But I think the Gospel, the Good News, suggests otherwise.

Now I have to say, though, before we land completely on that point, before we proclaim that marvelous truth, we must stop off at the cemetery. We must visit death. It's real—very real, more real than we sometimes want to admit. Many of us want to avoid the cemetery—the harshness, the sadness, the ugliness, and even the stench of death. We live in a culture that specializes in such avoidance. We do our best at all turns to make death pretty. (“Oh, doesn't she look nice!”) We do our best to run from it. Maybe if we just stay away from hospitals, from funeral homes, from the grave yard. (“Oh, he doesn't like those kinds of places. That's why he never shows up there. It's just too hard for him.”)

Running from death . . . our culture specializes in it. We constantly attempt to escape our mortality. We build bigger buildings, really high in the sky. (The Bible knows about this.) We come up with new technologies, new drugs. They'll take care of death, we believe. They'll eliminate the suffering we know too well. And while these things are working toward that we'll visit the fountains of youth that we so often like to visit or to create. Forever young, we won't have to go to the cemetery.

Sorry! We will! Lazarus dies! He really does die. Someone you love, someone you care for deeply really does die. Oh, maybe he is just sleeping, and if he's sleeping, he'll be fine. No, Lazarus is truly dead. Jesus waited four days to see him, which means that that the spirit of life that was thought to hover over the body of a dead person for three

days had truly disappeared. Lazarus is *really* dead. And yes, his death is a great intrusion. Your life was built around Lazarus. Your feelings are raw. Frankly, you are a little ticked: “Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Death is powerful. It brings all kinds of emotions—emotions sometimes that some of us are not accustomed to feeling or expressing. Anger, regret, guilt, deep sadness—they are all very real. Death is very real.

Our problems are very real. What we did and what was done to us—I mean, we don’t need to lie about the seriousness of it all. We don’t need to pretend that life wasn’t tough or that it isn’t. We don’t need to live with rose-colored glasses, accentuating only the positive. The movement toward Good News, the Gospel, takes us where Lazarus was taken. It takes us death, to the realness of life, pain, and suffering. It takes us to the cemetery, to the crematorium, for those of you who need a different image. Or for those who need yet another image, it takes us to the battlefield, to a valley of very dry bones—bones that have been dead for a long, long time; bones that came from people who were defeated in war and were left to rot. These people were not even given the dignity of a proper burial. These were folks who were left for the vultures to munch on.

As is quite obvious, the Bible is not some La-La book in some kind of La-La Land. The Bible is honest about life, sometimes much more honest than we are. But this honesty doesn’t stop at the battlefield. It doesn’t end at the cemetery. The honesty of the Bible looks with utmost seriousness to the power of the author of life, the power of the spirit of life.

Can these bones live? Of course not. They are dead, brittle bones that have been drying out for a long time. Of course they can’t come back to life. But Ezekiel tells us, these brittle bones are no match for the breath of the author of life, the wind, the spirit, the energy of God. “Then God said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain; [put your wind inside of them], that they may live.’ I prophesied as God

commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.”

We have no doubt who these bones are. They represent the whole house of Israel. These folks were saying that their bones were dried up, that their hope was lost. They were saying that life was forever ruined, that things would never change, that their life together was on a trajectory forever shaped by what occurred in the past, that life is forever controlled by death. Despair had become Israel’s natural habitation. They were throwing in the towel, but the promise was and is that God was not finished with them yet. The breath and energy of God is still flowing.

Lazarus is dead, really dead. It’s been four days. And Jesus faces the facts. The cemetery must be visited. Now, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are dear friends of his. They are overwhelmed with grief. Jesus is not removed from their grief. In fact, he is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” He is angry. His gut is wrenched. And he begins to weep. The stop at the cemetery takes us to a God who is unsettled by death, angered by it, a God who shares the pain we know, cries the tears that we cry, grieves the grief that we experience too often. But the story doesn’t end there.

After Jesus prayed to the Father, he cries out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” Death’s real, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Death is really real. It hurts. But death is not the final word!

“I am the resurrection and the life,” says the Lord. “I am connected to the energy, to the wind, to the spirit that brings life, the spirit of God that is larger than death. To trust in me is to trust in the power that won’t let you stay stuck, the power that compels you forward, the energy that won’t let you stay in the tombs that life has put you in or you yourselves have put you in.

Life buries us sometimes. But let’s face it. Sometimes we put ourselves in the tombs. Sometimes we allow death to forever reign. Sometimes some of us give in to the bitterness, the anger, the despair that death gives us. Some of us are ready to throw in the towel.

What's the point? Why go on living, or why live with some degree of joy or passion? Some of us are just content to hang on to the bitterness or the anger that life's pain and disappointments gave us. I don't know. Maybe it's just easier that way. Perhaps we have just gotten so accustomed to being bitter or angry and what bitterness and anger bring us, we don't know what else to do. We like the predictable death that bitterness and anger grant us.

Well, hear this. Jesus stands at the edge of the tombs life has given us or we have placed ourselves into and says, "Lazarus, come out!" And note: when we come out, we meet folks standing there, who themselves have heard the voice of Jesus, the voice of resurrection and life and who are ready to help unbind us, ready to remove the strips of death that surround us, ready to help us get unstuck.

It was about five years ago that my son came to me and told me that he was going to be a father. He wasn't married, and the young woman who was the mother was not someone with whom he had a long-term relationship. Obviously, I wasn't overly happy. I was very emotional when he told me the news, more emotional than he expected. I was somewhat angry, deeply sad. I was old enough to know that life would be forever changed for him, that some of the dreams that he had for himself and that we had for himself would not be realized. I knew the financial impact this would bring to him, the struggles that he would endure. I knew he wasn't ready to be a father, and honestly, I wasn't ready to be a grandfather. I mean, being a grandparent is reserved for old people. *My* grandparents were old. They sat in rocking chairs, soaked their dentures, and wore special shoes. The news that Jake shared with me was overwhelming for him, for me, for us. Life would be forever changed, never the same. Life would be on a trajectory always shaped by the past.

Have you met, Liam? Although he has lots of ants in his pants and occasionally when he's tired is somewhat ugly, he is the cutest grandkid in town. The joy he brings us is beyond description—joy I experience when after he has fallen asleep I carry him to his own bed; joy I

encounter when I am lulling him to sleep and he says every time, "Tell me the Joseph story;" joy I revel in when he asks questions like, "Do you call Grandma 'honey' because that is her second name?;" joy I anticipate as I begin to plan to buy an attachment to my bike so that he can pedal on the back with me as we both explore the new bike trail.

The trajectory of life is forever changed. And I now rejoice! Some of the hardest days in our family life have produced for us one of the greatest joys we have ever known.

"I am the resurrection and the life," says the Lord. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Death is not the final word!

"Do you believe that?"

Lazarus, Mary, John, Lou, Donn, Joel: "Come out!" Get unstuck. And let me and us help you unwrap the strips of cloth. You're unbound now. You're free. Now get going!