

“Cave, Tomb, Corpse, Stone”

Sermon for 2 April 2017

Texts: Titus 3:3-7; Ephesians 2:1-7 & John 11:33-44

It is a marvelous thing that Titus 3 explains Ephesians 2 for us. Paul sheds light on 1. what it means to be dead in trespasses and sin and then 2. he sets forth the operation of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and renewal. Regeneration and renewal are my themes for this message on the Christian life as a process of endless renewal. See how Scripture seamlessly interprets Scripture!

**You were dead in trespasses and sins** (Ephesians 2:1) . . . **but God made us alive together with Christ.** (2:5)

**"At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."**

But to get at this, in all honesty, I would like to share a few footnotes on my past. So please think high school. Yes, for me, that was 55 years ago. Imagine. I think it was life science class and we studied metamorphosis (bull frogs and butterflies). We went over the amazing stages of life. We wondered if a caterpillar was a butterfly . . . if the transformations were essential, or it was merely a matter of disguise. And in Sunday School, metamorphosis was seized upon as a metaphor for being born-again. A natural figure with very limited spiritual significance. And then there was regeneration, the re-growth of lost tissue: a tail, or leg. We were told that this was a phenomenon limited to simple, or primitive life forms. The astonishing complexity of the fetal pig was left for later discovery in biology lab. Still, the ideas of transformation and regeneration were introduced to us in a scientific setting! So intriguing and permanent.

So, metamorphosis, regeneration, personal transformation and endless renewal; they all go together, or all come together, as I reflect on the verse **you were dead . . . but God made us alive.** The Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory of salvation, or, a depiction of Christian's journey from this world to the celestial city, the New Jerusalem, and it suggests that life is linear, progressive. As we change, grow and mature, we are headed towards a destination. Heaven, a mansion with many rooms . . . a place of fellowship and worship. It is the physicality of Bunyan's allegory that strikes me . . . the biology of the Bible so to speak.

Perhaps you can recall with me the delightful and striking tangibility of a song sung by believing black slaves in America: remember, "I've got shoes, you've got shoes, all God's children got shoes . . . when I get to heaven going to put on those shoes and walk all over God's heaven, heaven, heaven. All those talkin' about heaven ain't going there, heaven, heaven, heaven." Shoes, walking, the reservation of heaven to the faithful . . . they are all projected by this spiritual. Did they actually expect to put on shoes and walk about heaven?! Well, yes, they did. Being shoeless, or barefoot in this life ends and everyone *who goes to heaven* get to go forward shod! There is an odd physicality to this belief . . . a bodily reality, real but different than most of us think, or believe about our after life.

Take the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead (John 11) and walk up to this topic. Jesus Christ demonstrates His authority over both life and death! That upsets the apple cart! They could tolerate religious discourse, opinions and talk, but raising the dead?! That is what truly terrified the chief priests, the Pharisees and the entire Sanhedrin! **What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away our place and our nation.** (11:47-8) Talk about blinders, about a political fixation! I trust you didn't miss this Jewish acknowledgment of His miraculous acts. They knew He existed, they knew the things He had done! Consider the establishment's dread of displacement (**take away our place?**) by which they mean social and religious prominence, privilege and position. And what about **everyone will believe in Him . . .** we certainly can't have that! Believing in Him was directly linked to disbelieving in us! To irrelevance, obsolescence, to replaceability—in human pride they wanted to be irreplaceable, to be “most important” and this was tied to the extension of the status quo, to tradition and to the “way things get done around here.” What had Jesus done?! **Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave and a stone lay against it.** (v.38) How extraordinarily parallel this setting is to that later setting which would soon follow Jesus's crucifixion! Cave, tomb, corpse, stone.

Jesus, what are you thinking? What are you about to do? Is this a fulfillment of Ezekiel 37: **The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me downing the middle of the valley. It was full of bones . . . And he said to me, Son of Man, can these bones live? And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones . . . O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord . . . Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.** (v. 1, 3-5) See how prophecy is laid over with prophecy: Ezekiel to Jesus, Jesus to Lazarus, Lazarus to Easter morning! A sequence of resurrections . . . what preparation, what pointing ahead! How prototypical!

Lazarus has been dead four days, **by this time there will be a stench.** (v. 39) We owe this touch, this realistic detail to Martha. Thank you, Martha, this is your moment just as Mary had hers! **Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?**” Oh, right, He did say that, remember? **So the sisters (had) sent to Him saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill. When Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is to the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.** (11:3-4) Through it? Through what? Through the sickness, through the dying, through the burying, through all the barefoot details of our human mortality! Jesus is saying, there is more. There is more to life than you think there is . . . there is, as I have said, this *odd physicality* to life after death. How we need to ponder these matters deeply before we blunder broadly into physician assisted suicide? Yes, before we ask those who have pledged to do no harm, to alter that practice and to do ultimate harm in killing people *at either end of human life.* How we need to meditate on what Jesus says about death and dying and how we need to bring our critical reflections to the attention of those who would legalize euthanasia *right now, in Augusta.* We should simultaneously let these considerations affect our funeral practices.

This passage signals that we should dispense with the foolish notion (error!) that Jesus never referred to himself as divine, He said **so that the Son of God might be glorified—** through the anguish of bereavement, through the loss, through shoeless death. Do the dead require a laying out suit and dress shoes? Oh, my, little did Lazarus know that he would have to turn his heaven walking shoes back in *and come back to this earth, this life, this world again!* **That the Son of God might be glorified through it!** Truly? Is it possible that what we go through down here is about His glory? For we are told that glorifying Him is what goes on in the great beyond. Our after life is all about His glory. Is that why Joseph languished in prison? Suffered rejection, death threats and, then, was forgotten by those whose lives he saved? Is that why **the sure mercies** of God were extended to a sinful, wretched King David in spite of his hard-hearted lust, adultery, deceit and murders? And what about Job's afflictions? What about

all his tragic loss, the senseless destruction, theft and fire, multiplied griefs and loss of family, wife and friends? **That the Son of God might be glorified?** Yes, I say. Cave, tomb, corpse and stone. They exist to glorify God! Yes, yes, yes.

**Could not He who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?** (v.37) **Son of Man, can these bones live?** The bystanders didn't all say that, but some raised their questions. What if this creation, what if this entire world is, in some magnificent way, simply the perfect setting for the glory of the Son to be displayed. **The heavens tell the glory of God** so why shouldn't our circumstances also glorify Him? Our perplexities? Our doubts and questions? Lazarus was dead, really dead, four days dead and just so that there would be no doubt there was a stench, the reeking decomposition of his body came pouring forth when **they took away the stone.** (v. 41) They took the lid off death! Meanwhile, Jesus prays: **Father, I think you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I say this on account of the people standing around,** (you know the gagging crowd, the people affected by the putrefying bad air, the stench of a dead man, the atomizing neighbor, brother, friend) **that they may believe that You sent Me.** Have you considered the scene? Lazarus, all reeling ripe with death? And into the midst of the awfulness, piercing the stench, Jesus **cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."** (v.43) Jesus prophesied. His word caused the corpse of Lazarus to live. Now come the repercussions.

**And out he came.** The stone had to be removed for him to emerge, not so that they could get to him but rather so that he could come forth to them! And, I must believe, the stench was gone . . . some tatters of it may have clung to his burial clothes. Perhaps, that is why Jesus said, **Unbind him and let him go.** Why unbind him? Jesus commands them to physically touch (!), to deal with **the man who had died.** He commands them to reintegrate him, to be re-introduced to each other. This is identical to Jesus' command to Thomas: **Put your hand here**—indicating the wound in His resurrected body! Touch me Thomas. Cave, tomb, corpse and stone! There is this, yes, *odd physicality* to the resurrected life. You do not unbind a ghost. Letting someone go *to catch the air, to freshen up* is what you do for real, breathing persons. The reality of the power of the resurrection was in Lazarus. The proof was tangible, touchable—it was an open invitation to handle the evidence! It was a most notable, irrefutable and stunning miracle. Lazarus, we are told joined Jesus, Mary and Martha and Judas Iscariot in table fellowship at Bethany as the Passover of the Jews approached. In confirming normalcy, people came to witness the miracle man and the miracle worker. Food was shared, oil was poured, interactions happened! Again, we may suppose that *all this glorified God* and it was the talk of the town—the occurrence was not hushed up, or kept secret. *Everything was done in the open and all of it was verifiable as the cave, tomb, corpse and stone.* Indeed, it was so real that the **chief priests** who plotted to kill Jesus also made plans to exterminate Lazarus **because many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus** (John 12:10) *because the witness of his life was a testimony the grace of God manifest in the Son of God.* If the Jews could get rid of both of them, they could pretend that nothing ever happened *and revise history,* They scripted their denials *propagating fake news.* Not only did they refuse to believe themselves, but they sought to hinder anyone else believing either. *How monstrously wicked is that?!*

Wouldn't it be interesting to know if Lazarus went back to his empty tomb? And did he, some two weeks later, also visit Jesus' empty tomb? Did he ponder how *God was being glorified?* I know that when I ponder these things that is where my mind goes. And if shoes in heaven glorify God, I am very certain that those who believe will be sized and fitted! And we will walk together with Him!

These resurrection facts declare that: there is more to heaven than "mansions floating in the clouds, singing choirs, harps and little pink cherubs!" And this being the case, why aren't more people talking about it? To be sure, frog eggs become tadpoles, and eventually those tadpole become adult amphibians; they develop lungs, suppress their gills and, voila, we have

juvenile frogs on their way to adulthood! Each individual frog has its own single life existence, one shot and that life is over—just as it is with us **biologically** usually. I mean, excepting Lazarus . . . and, yes, of course, Jesus! The *normal* pattern of development, for frogs, involving metamorphosis is perhaps physically more interesting than what we human go through but then humans have souls and an afterlife.

Resurrection is better than, superior to metamorphosis! We look forward to a personal existence after death and, because of Easter, we can proclaim there is *continuity* to our existence: friendships begun here are perfected and preserved there! So, we are back to shoes (and walking) and physical things . . . beyond caves, tombs, corpses and stones. Something really different lies ahead. It's glorious.

Something like what happened to Lazarus has happened to us spiritually! Our Ephesians verse declares that we were once **spiritually dead**, but that God has made us spiritually **alive**. We **were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another**—these being conditions of death that pertain to our former life, pre-conversion life. So it is not the cessation of life, as it was with Lazarus, that is in view here; rather is it a low, or degraded level of living. **But God** in His mercy intervened. And by **the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, richly through Jesus Christ our Lord**, God raised us up to a spiritual existence—one which begins with salvation and endures forever. This personal transformation is glorifying to God but it is not an end in itself. It is the beginning stages of the entire renovation of the cosmic order. Yes, it is the birth pangs of the new heaven and the new earth. And that new order will be more real than real, as well as truer than true. Things will be put back in order, restored in purity . . . sin, darkness and evil will be abolished. And it will all transpire at the Word of the Lord. He will speak and it will be.

Just as it was for Lazarus. So shall it be at the resurrection of the saints. Glory be to God! Where are my shoes?!

**Amen.**