

As some of you know, I have only started gardening pretty recently. In fact, at the very first parish clean up day that I attended back in 2008, I tied a black cloth around my thumb as a symbol of my gardening abilities – that I was the opposite of a green thumb – that I was in fact more likely to help usher pants toward their deaths than to helping them grow and thrive. My track record has improved over the years, though there has been a fair share of collateral damage along the way.

The first winter and spring after I put in my new flower garden with the help of a landscaper in my home on Oregon Hill, I was a little obsessed with it. As a newbie gardener, when put the garden to bed for the winter, I wasn't convinced that it would come back even though my father assured me stuff was happening under the ground that I couldn't see. So, every day I walk around inspecting my gardens to see how things were coming along. Given my concerns, it was particularly exciting when, in what seemed to be the dead of winter, I would find the slightest traces of new growth forming at the bases of plants. What looked dead – completely and utterly dead – was in fact showing signs of new life. Stuff had been happening indiscernible to my eyes just below the surface.

Well, this year when I moved to my new home, I was determined to bring some of the plantings with me, particularly some rose and blueberry bushes. I dug up what I could and replanted them, but what I couldn't dig up, I took some clippings of in the hopes that they would root in water and could then be planted. I have no idea how to grow from clippings, but I was determined to give it a try. Not surprisingly, slowly but surely the clippings died one by one by one until the last one turned brown and brittle. However, when it came time to add it to the compost pile, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. For some inexplicable reason, I took the cutting, dead, brown and brittle, and placed it in ground – not even very snugly -- where it remains to this day. And just like I did that first winter and early spring when I started gardening, every couple of days, I wander out to inspect it for any signs of growth, any trace of new life. This plant is good and dead, and yet there's something in me that is willing to consider that it just might take root and come back to life.

Both our readings this morning from Ezekiel and the Gospel of John are about hope in new life in the midst of an explosion of death and decay – not a bit of even circumstantial evidence of life to be found. Those bones that Ezekiel wandered around were very dry, the life long sucked out of them. And Lazarus, Lazarus had been dead and in that cave for so long that the

stink of decay could be detected before they even rolled away the stone. These stories start out about what's good and truly dead.

Let's start with Ezekiel. Before being hauled off in captivity to live as an exiled priest without a temple in which to serve, Ezekiel, and his fellow Jerusalemites with him, experienced the savagery of war with the Babylonians. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were under siege for almost two years, resulting in famine, disease, and despair (2 Kings 25:3). The Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem, razed the temple to the ground, killed many of its inhabitants, and forced the rest to migrate to Babylon. Ezekiel was a prophet in a community beset by trauma after war-torn trauma. The House of Israel was no more.

So when God transports Ezekiel to a valley filled with very dry bones and asks him, upon his inspection of all this desolation, "Mortal, can these bones live?" it is no surprise that Ezekiel can only give the most tepid of answers, "O Lord God, you know." Nevertheless, when God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones so that they might live, Ezekiel does what would otherwise be considered absurd. He prophesied to those bones until they came rattling together bone on bone, with sinews, and flesh and skin and finally breath received from the four winds so that those bones might live. In that moment, God promised that the people scattered to the four winds would be brought back by the four winds bound together by the Spirit of God as a community again with life, and land, and purpose. The house of Israel would live again.

In the Gospel of John, though all was not quite as desolate as it was during the time that Ezekiel prophesied, the story hinges on assurances that Lazarus was good and truly dead. He was sick and had died, was wrapped in grave clothes and buried in a cave for so many days that the stench of decomposition left no doubt about it. Lazarus' body was as lifeless and as not so easily reconstituted as those dry bones in the desolate valley. Both Martha and Mary told Jesus that Lazarus wouldn't have died had he been there and Martha added without fully understanding the implied request, "But even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask." And so, when he finally did get around to showing up, Jesus stood by the cave, commanded the stone to be moved away and told Lazarus to come out, and so Lazarus emerged, fully alive in flesh and blood.

What gave Ezekiel and Martha and all those who rolled that stone away – what gave them faith in the absence of even the most circumstantial evidence? What kept them from throwing

their hands up in face of the ridiculous and walking away? What gave them “hope for renewed life in this landscape of death?”ⁱ

The same thing, perhaps, that gives us hope in the absence of compelling evidence. Why not hope in God when the alternative is resignation under the staggering weight of grave clothes? Why not trust in God when confronted with the choice between resignation and resistance? Why not resist a reality that insists that death is death as we know it and life is life as we know it and there is no space in between in which something new and beautiful can emerge at the juncture by the hand of God? Why not trust this God to be the same God that is always one to disrupt what we think we know of reality whenever it constrains, confines and binds in ways that make us less than who and what we are.

Jesus said, “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.” Our belief in the reality of those words invites us and urges us toward the reality of God’s existence. For us in the here and now, that means entering into a liminal space of life and death, time and eternity, decay and rebirth where all possible passages that lead to life as God knows it for us exist and are open to us even now.

This is a space of re-creation and resurrection, where what needs to be put to death is put to death so that what needs to grow has room to grow. It is a space of life in community that calls us each out of the grave clothes that bind and constrain and restrain so that we can lose whatever stink of death and decay still clings to us. It is where we let go of life as we know it, and life as the world knows it so that we might experience life as God knows it. It is where we continually respond to Jesus’ command, “Come out. Come out. Come out and live” until that life is all we know.

ⁱ Meda Stamper. “Commentary on the Gospel, Fifth Sunday of Lent.” *WorkingPreacher*.
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4&alt=1>.