

I Will Raise You Up

Liturgical Day

Fifth Sunday of Lent (A), April 2, 2017

Readings

Ez 37:12-14, Ps 130, Rom 8:8-11, Jn 11:1-45

Prayer

How did Christ visit you with new life? From what tomb did he call you forth?

Who in your life needs to hear Christ's commandment, "Come forth!"

Early Christians realized that something made them distinct from their neighbors. They attributed this distinction to the risen Christ present among them. They gave his presence different names: Holy Spirit and fire, grace, salt and light, Paraclete, Spirit of Truth, new life. With each of these expressions, early Christians tried to give a name to the spiritual dynamism that had transformed their own lives and that continued to build up the community.

You will not abandon my soul among the dead, or let your beloved know decay. (Ps 16:10)

John's Gospel speaks of this presence as new life. This fits into John's wider theology, which understands Jesus to be the herald of a new creation. John's Gospel emphasizes this new creation in its very first words, "In the beginning..." which echo the opening words of Genesis. The first 11 chapters of John's Gospel chronicle the signs by which Jesus revealed this new creation to his disciples. Several of these signs represent triumphs over death's agents—want, hunger, sickness and chaos. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus reveals that the new life he bears gives him authority over death itself.

Many Jews of Jesus' day believed in the resurrection of the dead. This is clear from statements about resurrection in Jewish texts like 2 Maccabees or 1 Enoch. It is also clear from Martha's statement in today's Gospel, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day." Martha's belief reflected Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ez 37:1-14), the last verses of which we hear in our first reading. This resurrection was an eschatological event expected to occur just before the final judgment.

When Jesus calls himself "the resurrection and the life," he transforms this belief. The resurrection was not an event in time, but rather a core reality of his ministry. In Jesus Christ, the universe received a second chance at creation. Anyone who believed in his death and resurrection, and followed his teaching and example, could participate in this new creation. "I am the resurrection and the life...everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." During his earthly ministry, Jesus embodied this new creation with such fullness that, in his presence, death retained no dominion over the living.

The victory is won, but the battle is not yet complete. Death's agents are still at work in the world, gnawing at every human heart and threatening every human community. Many of us entomb ourselves—often with a significant investment of time and energy—in materialism, vanity, pride and lust. Many of us can also remember the day we first heard Christ's command, "Come forth!" Leaving our tombs, we can encounter the same new life that gave such dynamism to the first disciples. We might not embody this new life with such Christ-like perfection that we can raise the dead, but we can reveal the new creation in other ways. As Jesus raised up Lazarus, so we must raise each other. Filled with his new life and with a heart like his—both broken and loving—we seek out those in the tombs and cry out to them, "Come forth!"



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