

A Time to Be Born

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 6:1-11; John 20:1-18

Easter Vigil – March 31, 2018

There was a bride-to-be who wanted to get married in an old country church. So, she and her wedding planner scheduled a trip together one afternoon, away from the large city in which she was living—to this lovely old country church she had heard about, some location some 40 miles away! And when they arrived there, in the bride-to-be's mind, why the whole setting was absolutely picturesque! That beautiful old white church, freshly-painted was shimmering in the late afternoon sunlight that fell upon it!

As soon as the bride-to-be saw it—she looked at the wedding planner and said to her with a big, broad smile on her face: “It's perfect!”

Yes sir, she could certainly see herself getting married in that beautiful old church with the most exquisite stained-glass windows!

Yes, the space was small—but that was fine—because she and her fiancé wanted to keep their wedding as an intimate affair; inviting only their closest family members and dearest friends to attend!

The congregation where she was hoping to get married was currently without a pastor, but that actually worked in her favor too, because she had checked and her own pastor and he said that he was available to officiate at her wedding in that old country church on the day and at the time she had in mind!

In addition to this, she was more than willing to pay the fee the church leaders of that old country congregation had quoted to her—for her to be able to be able to hold their wedding ceremony there!

But she and her wedding planner entered the sanctuary that afternoon—they had done as they were instructed; finding a key that was left under a large doormat there, they entered the side door of the church! And upon entering the sanctuary, her heart seemed to beat only faster! She knew for certain that this was the perfect location for her wedding---well—that is—until she stepped out the front of the sanctuary, as she and her new husband would on their wedding day!

Suddenly she was most unhappy because when she exited the front doors of the sanctuary she was confronted with a cemetery! She saw herself on that day, in her long white dress, her head filled with dreams, her arms filled with flowers, her world filled with guests, leaving that beautiful where she and her husband had just spoken their solemn vows to each other—**ONLY TO FACE A GRAVEYARD!**

This was supposed to be “the time of her life” and not a time to “think about death!” Yet, if you have been part of the Church for any time at all, you know that God is not squeamish about where he takes his people.

But have you and I ever stopped to think that this is precisely where Christ Jesus, the Heavenly Bridegroom, does lead his Church—into a graveyard!

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” the Apostle Paul asks us in our epistle lesson again this evening! “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,” he says, “that just as he was raised from the dead to walk in the glory of his Father, we too, should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4)!

Baptism, your spiritual entry way and my spiritual entry way into the Church—the Body of Christ—is a burial. Or as the mother and the father of a newborn infant, there you stand, with your baby in your arms. She's beautiful! She's dressed in white! You still can't get enough of holding her. And then the pastor takes her over by the baptismal font and talks about burying your baby in Baptism.

No, our loving God is not squeamish about where he takes his people; not now, not ever!

Consider our Old Testament Lesson today from Ezekiel 37! Here, we have a prophet that God took into a valley covered with dead, dry bones. Ezekiel, you might remember, in addition to being a prophet was also a priest—a descendant of Levi. Walking into that valley of dead, dry bones would have rendered him, as a priest, therefore, to be ceremoniously unclean—and this was a very serious matter!

So let me point out to you, now, very directly—that what we normally bury into the ground was out there, lying upon the surface of the earth, exposed to the light, and Ezekiel could not help but see them! Ezekiel saw all these bones and there were many of them.

These bones were more than likely the remains of soldiers who had fought in battle but who no doubt had lost their own lives in that encounter! And then the LORD God Almighty asked Ezekiel the most haunting question of all: “Son of man, can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37:3)?

“Can these bones live?” It’s haunting—this question—because it causes an everyday mortal human being like you and me—to ponder—the possibility of a future once our lives have run their course!

This question isn’t asking you and me to explain what happened in our past or to even dissect and explain the cause of human suffering. It’s asking us to allow our gracious God to peel back, just a corner of our own life’s history, and to peel back just a corner of this world’s history—and to believe that God longs to make a place for us in his kingdom—and yet—before any of us can see this—God must supply us with that great gift called “faith.”

“Can these bones live?” God asks!

“You know,” Ezekiel answers: “You know alone know, O God” (Ezekiel 37:3)!

In answering the LORD’s question Ezekiel doesn’t simply blurt out the answer: “No!”

He doesn’t close his eyes in absolute despair and become totally limited in his thinking, ruling out all possibilities for him and other living human beings to have an even greater experience of life in the future!

Ezekiel doesn’t say: “No!” and Ezekiel doesn’t say: “Yes!” either! Instead, Ezekiel just stands there a few moments with his eyes wide open, looking straight at God. There Ezekiel is—standing there in the valley of dry bones—completely open to whatever possibilities there may be that the LORD God Almighty has in store for him next!

In the words of our Gospel lesson this evening (John 20:1-18) Mary Magdalene isn’t standing, at this point, in the midst of a valley of dead dry bones, but she could have perceived her experience of life—at that moment—in exactly this way!

Mary is now standing in a different graveyard; the one outside the city gates of Jerusalem! The bones of Jesus were entombed in a borrowed grave from a rather wealthy man; a highly respected Jewish leader among the Sanhedrin named Joseph of Arimathea.

Mary was devastated. Not only had they crucified her Lord, but now they had also taken away his body. To have killed Jesus in such a brutal, cruel, painful, merciless fashion was one thing—but now Mary believes—that on top of this most horrible travesty—that some graverobber has desecrated his lifeless body and carried it to a distant, unknown place!

Mary's reaction is understandable. She stood there weeping, not only for Jesus and not only for herself, but quite possibly also for the whole suffering world—a world cannot be controlled by well-intentioned human beings—where suffering—unjust suffering so often comes to those we love!

Yet into this graveyard, God now sends another Prophet; another Priest who is an even greater prophet and priest than Ezekiel was! Into this extremely sad situation, God sent his only-begotten Son, who had been crucified, but who is now Risen from the dead!

Jesus entered our world and walked right into the midst of human suffering and faced that haunting question: “Can these dry bones live?”

Only this time we do not hear the same answer that Ezekiel so wisely gave! We don't hear the answer, “O Lord God, you alone know!”

No—this time we see it—we see it in Jesus. Jesus is the Sovereign Lord and he alone knows.

With that one word: “Mary!” her life is forever changed! She has been born again born anew, born in the same way that our gracious God longs for every one to be born anew in the face of death, devastation and despair.

I am closing my message this evening with the words of St. Peter, for just as Mary Magdalene was filled with a living hope through the Risen Christ who came to her, Peter and all the other disciples of Jesus were too.

Listen to what Peter writes in I Peter 1:3-7:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.