

“Maintaining a Balance between the Heavenly and the Earthly”
Ezekiel 37:1–14, John 11:1–45
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Just before Dana and I got married nearly thirty-nine years ago, my mentor’s wife told her what one of her responsibilities was, given that she was marrying a minister. “They have a tendency to get their heads stuck up in the clouds, with all their lofty thoughts and aspirations,” she said. “When that happens, you need to grab him by the ankles and pull him back down to earth.”

It was not bad advice. We clergy can be a bit too full of ourselves, get carried away with heavenly things, and in the process, become disconnected from life on planet earth, not to mention reality. When this happens, someone needs to yank us back down, for our own benefit and the effectiveness of our ministry. But the truth is religion itself can become so otherworldly that it ceases to have any meaning or purpose.

The good news is the texts of our faith maintain a balance between the heavenly and the earthly. This is certainly the case with our readings from Ezekiel and John. And one of the most central claims of Christian faith, the idea of incarnation, does this too, as God takes on human flesh in the person Jesus. We are wise to follow the trajectory of scripture and the teaching of our faith at this point.

It seems pretty clear that our texts today are firmly rooted in human experience here on earth. Ezekiel addresses a nation overwhelmed by the grief of having been taken into exile. He offers hope through a vivid and macabre vision of dry bones taking on flesh and ultimately living again, almost like some zombie movie. But he begins with a clear acknowledgment of the people’s pain.

They feel like they are dead, utterly desolate and without hope. Why wouldn’t they, after all they have experienced? Conquered by a foreign power, taken into exile in Babylon, separated from their home and their God, everything they value... Ezekiel gets this.

The characters in the reading from John are equally in touch with reality. The disciples don't want to go back to Judea because Jesus' life has been threatened there. Only Thomas, the one many criticize for having doubt after Jesus' resurrection, expresses a willingness to go, though even he says, "Let us also go, *that he may die with him.*"

Mary and Martha are equally in touch with reality and willing to express their feelings openly and honestly to Jesus. He has delayed in coming, even after hearing that their brother Lazarus is ill. During the delay, Lazarus dies. So, when Jesus finally arrives, the sisters light into him, expressing faith in his ability to have made a difference yet also irritation that he has delayed so long. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" each of them says.

Even Jesus looks very down to earth, very human in this story. When he sees the women weeping, along with all the other people there, John says Jesus is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He asks where they have laid Lazarus, and when they say, "Lord, come and see," Jesus also weeps. Then, John says one more time that Jesus is greatly disturbed as he makes his way to the tomb.

Some interpreters, apparently troubled by Jesus appearing to be too human, have argued that he is not really sad. He is more upset with the power death has over people, and he wants to identify with his friends. But this ignores the detailed nature of the text. Like all good writing, it is specific and sensory. Jesus actually weeps, he is not faking it, and he is deeply disturbed.

This is a very human Jesus with his feet firmly on the ground. He doesn't have to fake tears in order to identify with humankind. He trusts that there is more than this life, he may even know he will resuscitate Lazarus, but he also knows that death brings grief, even for the faithful, and so, he weeps bitterly.

Strange as it may seem, all of this is good news for us. A faith that is detached from life isn't very useful. We need a God and a faith that appreciate the messiness and the wonder of the human condition. Our faith and the God we know in Christ do.

The reading from Ezekiel speaks to us at times when we have deep concerns for our nation, which for many people is right now. We have

divisions that seem unmendable. We have started down a path that departs from our heritage of freedoms and rights and is alienating to our allies. There has been deconstruction at home and abroad without any hint of a plan for what to reconstruct or how.

Not everyone agrees that this is a time of deep national concern, which is part of our challenge, but for those who do, there is comfort in the promise of Ezekiel that God notices and cares about the lives of nations and their struggles.

The reading from John speaks to us when we know personal grief. It tells us it's okay to have questions and doubts, even express anger to God. It tells us it's okay to fear death because it is real and it separates us from those we love. It tells us that God is like Jesus who weeps with those who grieve, not like those in this time who think the faithful should be so convinced of their hope for eternity that they never grieve.

I remember walking across the parking lot at a previous setting on a Sunday afternoon, just after having led a funeral service for a friend in the church about my age who had young children. He had come to me just after the diagnosis of cancer and before going home. He didn't know how to tell his family. Several months later, we held his funeral. As I walked across the parking lot, a woman in the church walked past me and said, "Where's your smile? People of faith walk with a smile." "I just performed so and so's funeral," I said, but she just stared blankly, as if to say, "So?" She didn't get it, she just didn't get it... but the good news of our faith is that God does, the God we know in Christ does.

But while it is important that our faith is in touch with reality and deeply grounded in human experience, if this is all it has to offer, it will still fall short. It needs to offer some word of hope and healing for the brokenness of our experience, something heavenly to balance the earthly, and as we can see in our texts, it does.

There is plenty of brokenness here, we might say even a little ickiness. Ezekiel paints a picture of dry bones gaining muscle and flesh and then coming to life. In the reading from John, Martha warns Jesus that there will be a stench in the tomb because Lazarus has been dead four days. I think of the reaction of children in another church I served

when the minister thought the deacon had the tray of communion cups before he did and the entire tray hit the floor with juice spraying everywhere. Into the stunned silence of the room a child said, “Ooo...” We might say the same about these stories and their ickiness, “Ooo...”

But into all the messiness and ick God breathes a word of hope. The bones in Ezekiel come to life, God pours Spirit into the nation of Israel, the people will return to their land and recover hope. Jesus prays to God for help and then calls forth Lazarus from the tomb. There is still work to be done even after the divine miracle, Lazarus must be unbound, but the part that only God can do God does. This is what God offers us in our struggles, not simply companionship and understanding but hope.

It comes in different ways, but often through some human agency. God brings Lazarus back to life, but a person named Jesus is involved.

In this month’s issue of *The Christian Century* Presbyterian pastor Erica MacCreaigh writes about her struggles coming out of COVID (p. 27). Her marriage ended abruptly, she had to sell her dream home, and her first pastorate ended badly. Finally, she found herself in a temporary job in a town that was 800 miles away from any family. She became deeply depressed and began to wonder if these bones could live. She slept a lot, ate a lot of Oreos, and generally lounged in self-pity, but none of these actions moved her toward healing.

She did eventually emerge from the tomb of depression, and what enabled her to do so was other people God used – an unexpected phone call, an uncannily well-timed text, an occasional visit from out of state. Near the end of her wilderness time, a friend took her to lunch and just listened for forty minutes, after which she asked, “What makes it possible for you to keep your faith in God?” Erica thought about that for a few moments and then replied, “Not what, who. You make it possible. People like you, people who don’t give up on me. You give me hope that God still cares.”

She goes on to say this.

Can these bones live? Yes, by the voice and the presence of the people of God bringing living water to a thirsty world. As Tersea of Avila famously observed, Christ has no body but ours, no

hands or feet on earth but ours. Through our eyes Christ looks upon the world with compassion. Upon our feet Christ walks to do good. And with our hands Christ blesses the world.

To that I'd add that through our ears Christ hears the cries of those who suffer, through our presence Christ companions the lost, and through our voices Christ speaks the truth about the stubborn resiliency of the human spirit.

God breathes a word of hope into contexts of despair — personal, communal, and national. God breathes life into the dead places of our existence. It often happens through other people God uses, but no matter how it happens, it is God who is at work. Sometimes we are the instruments God uses to bring life, sometimes we are the ones who need the breath of life, but either way we are grateful for the gift.

William Cowper was an eighteenth-century English poet and hymnwriter whose life experience revealed the earthly and the heavenly. He wrote majestic texts, four of which are in our hymnal, but he also struggled with mental health issues for much of his life. On one occasion, he nearly committed suicide, but somehow God breathed hope into him just before he did. Afterward, he wrote this text.

Sometimes a light surprises
The Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord who rises
With healing in His wings;
When comforts are declining,
He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining,
To cheer it after rain.

Sometimes a light surprises all of us, confronting our darkness and transforming it. Sometimes God rises with healing in our hearts and world. We are grateful that God does not ignore or deny our suffering, but we are ever more grateful that God can do something about it!