

## **Death and Eternal Life**

Sermon, Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 10, 2011

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

Deacon Daisy Kirkpatrick

*Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45*

Today we have two stories about death and resurrection. In Ezekiel's vision, we watch the impossible happen as the Spirit revivifies the bodies of those long dead. Through God acting in our lives all things are possible because the Lord places his Spirit in each one of us.

The Gospel is the story of Jesus' raising of Lazarus. Notice that when word is brought to Jesus of Lazarus' illness, Jesus doesn't go rushing off. He stays where he is for two more days and explains that Lazarus' illness provides an opportunity for him to glorify God. This is similar to last week's Gospel where Jesus says that the man was born blind "so that God's works might be revealed in him."<sup>1</sup> Jesus found opportunities to demonstrate the glory of God so that we might believe. Jesus brings us the possibility of eternal life, but we must believe in it for it to happen. He says, "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."<sup>2</sup>

Both the readings from Ezekiel and the Gospel foreshadow the Resurrection, but upon reflection, I decided to talk a bit about death, our own deaths. We will talk a lot about the Resurrection on Easter and after. But it is still Lent and appropriate for us to think a bit about our own mortality. On Ash Wednesday we heard the words "Remember that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return."

Death is a difficult topic. We don't like to think about it, let alone talk about it; but it is an inevitable part of life. When we begin, sperm and egg and a spark of life combine to create a new being, a new person. At the other end of our earthly life, the spark is released to continue on, while our mortal flesh returns to the earth.

We don't really know what experiences are in store for that spark of life, the soul that has been released. We, who are here, have not yet had this experience. What we *have* experienced is a sense of loss and abandonment when those that we love have gone on. We are left here with an aching loneliness, which may diminish over time but never really goes away. Maybe that is why, as a society, we tend to shy away from the thought of death, because for those of us still here, death brings pain and sadness and grief. The Church provides services that focus our attention on the resurrection and eternal life; but somehow that is a difficult thought to get hold of when one is filled with missing the person who has gone on.

Jesus promised us life after death – eternal life, he said – but he didn't tell us much about what it would be like. However there are many stories from people who have experienced what is called a "near death experience." These are people who have almost died, or sort of died, or even really, clinically died, but then revived or been resuscitated. What is remarkable about their stories is

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<sup>1</sup> John 9:3

<sup>2</sup> John 10:25-26

their similarity. Many people who have had this experience tell stories of being met by angels or loved ones who have gone on. Many describe a tunnel with a bright light at the end. Almost all describe a cessation of pain and anxiety, a feeling of comfort and even joy. The New York Times bestseller *Embraced by the Light* by Betty J. Eadie<sup>3</sup> relates details of a profound near-death experience. Her story helps me to believe in life after death in a way that no amount of preaching can.

Betty hemorrhaged severely following surgery. As her body grew weaker and weaker, she suddenly felt a surge of energy and was drawn quickly out of her body as though by a giant magnet. She was met by three figures who identified themselves as her guardian angels and she realized that death is actually a rebirth into a greater life of understanding and knowledge that stretches forward and backward in time. She experienced moving through a dark tunnel into brilliant light where a figure welcomed her.

“I saw the light immediately around him was golden, as if his whole body had a golden halo around it. ... I felt his light blending into mine, literally, and I felt my light being drawn to his. It was as if there were two lamps in a room, both shining, their light merging together. ... As our lights merged, I felt as if I had stepped into his countenance, and I felt an utter explosion of love.

“It was the most unconditional love I have ever felt, and as I saw his arms open to receive me I went to him and received his complete embrace and said over and over, “I’m home. I’m home. I’m finally home.” I felt his enormous spirit and knew that I had always been a part of him, that in reality I had never been away from him. ... I knew that he was my Savior, and friend, and God. He was Jesus Christ, who had always loved me.”<sup>4</sup>

The book goes on to describe Betty’s experiences on “the other side.” She constantly emphasizes the importance of love and forgiveness. In my own journey, I have found reading books of this kind very helpful. We have the teachings of Jesus in the Bible and from the Church; Jesus emphasized how important belief is – in him and in his gift of eternal life. Reading these personal stories helps to make this much more real for me; they strengthen my faith.

I have lost many of my closest friends and sometimes miss them very much. Rereading this book in preparation for this sermon reminded me that my separation from my loved ones is only temporary. The book is so full of love and joy that I felt filled with peace. Her descriptions of meeting and talking with Jesus are inspiring and help me feel closer to him. As Betty says about her meeting with Jesus, “He was life itself, love itself, and his love gave me a fullness of joy, even to overflowing. I knew that I had known him from the beginning, from long before my earth life, because my spirit *remembered* him.”<sup>5</sup> We all have that capability, to remember Jesus, and know his love and caring for us in a real and tangible way.

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Eadie, Betty J., *Embraced by the Light*, Gold Leaf Press, Placerville, CA, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp 41-42.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 3:20-21