

Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-6, 11-15, 20-27, 32-45

### “Premature Burial”

On the property of the Parkville Presbyterian Camp, north of Kansas City, Missouri, is an old, decrepit cemetery. Imagine, if you will, the telling of the following story in hushed tones *in* this cemetery, very late on a moonlit night, in the midst of twenty-five or thirty spellbound junior high young people. 😊 In the center of this ancient burial ground is the sunken grave of a twelve-year-old girl, whose tragic death occurred on the very night of President Abraham Lincoln’s assassination. The little girl, Molly Wade, was a good, if precocious, lass, who loved to play with her mother’s beads. Jewelry fascinated the girl, and she especially enjoyed taking apart and hiding the beads of her mother’s many necklaces. But poor little Molly fell ill for three days with influenza, according to legend; and, on the third night of her affliction, she was presumed to have “given up the ghost.” Molly was buried in a simple pine box in a shallow grave, back in a time before embalming took place, and was left to rest in peace. *Rest* she did *not*, however, as it seems the pronouncement of her demise had been erroneous. Buried alive, Molly awakened in the dark confines of her small, but sealed, coffin, and in panic she attempted to claw her way out. But this caused the soft earth above to cave in on her as she tried to dig her way out to the surface, even as a driving rainstorm soaked the freshly-turned soil above. Meanwhile, back at her house, Molly’s mother thrashed about in bed, grief-stricken...and haunted by a recurring dream that her beloved child was trying to reach her from “the other side.” Rousing her husband, she made him prepare the horses and carriage for a midnight ride *back* to the cemetery, which was three miles away. Trying to humor his distraught wife, he braved the elements and drove them to the little graveyard out on Pine Ridge. When they arrived, they were horrified to discover the sunken condition of the grave and the evidence of little Molly’s attempt to escape her premature burial. While the girl’s body was never recovered, bloody streaks adorned the inside of the casket lid, and a few trademark beads were left scattered across the ground. Soon thereafter her mother was committed to an asylum for the insane, and her father enlisted in the Union Army, never again to return to the small village of Parkville. And to this very day...so the legend portends...Molly continues to defiantly walk the trails and the grounds of the camp, tossing her beloved beads

on to the roofs of the canvass tents in which the campers sleep, during the darkest hours of the night. It is her way, so goes our legend, of letting the living know that she is still around...watching...and waiting...for just the right moment. (Cue the discrete tossing of just a few beads into the circle of campers, evoking a cry of abject terror and panic. 😊 BAD Pastor Dave! Bad boy!)

Oy vey! What a lot of hooey! I know it, and the kids know it, too, but hey...what junior or senior high doesn't enjoy a good, creepy, well-presented ghost story that makes you think twice before trotting out to "the necessary" in the middle of the night?! Especially when acorns fall from the tall trees above their tents periodically throughout the evening, and a few well-placed beads show up just outside the entrance to be found there in the morning....

Premature burial is one of the creepiest themes of the horror movie genre, isn't it? And I suppose that's because we find it more plausible than the other absurd notions that get replicated in sequel after sequel. This one, at least, seems to make people stop and think: "Gee...couldn't *that really happen?*" And well before the introduction of the silver screen to our culture, people were sharing spooky stories...even in Jesus' time. And even then they loved a good, happy ending...of someone who *beat* the death trap and lived, when they weren't expected to survive. Today's powerful story in John 11 speaks to this.

Mary and Martha, who live in the community of Bethany, are two of Jesus' closest friends. They send word to him that their brother, Lazarus, is desperately ill. "Please come," they plead, "we need your help. Hurry! He is sinking fast!" But by the time Jesus is able to get there, Lazarus has not only *died*, he has been in the grave for *four days*. So, when Jesus finally arrives, the sisters come out to meet him and express their grief: "He's gone, Jesus. We've lost him. Oh, Lord, if only you'd gotten here sooner, our dear brother would not have died." The message is clear: *Now it's too late*, even for *you* to help....

Family and friends have gathered, and in their deep sorrow they have begun the wake and are weeping over the loss of their loved one. Jesus' heart goes out to them, and *he weeps with* them. *He* loved Lazarus, too, and he loves *them*, and so he shares their pain. Then Jesus goes out to the cave-like tomb and says to them, "Roll back the stone!"

Martha, always the realist and ever-ready to speak her mind, protests: “But Lord...we can’t do *that!* He has been in there *four days*. By now there will be a *terrible odor!*”

And what does Jesus say to her? “Martha, only *believe* and you will see the power of God.” Sound familiar? Like maybe from *last week’s* sermon?

So they roll the stone away, and Jesus cries out in a loud voice (loud *enough*, one presumes, to “wake the dead”): “Lazarus, come forth!” And incredibly, miraculously, amazingly, before their very eyes, Lazarus is *resurrected!* He comes out of the tomb still in his grave clothes. His head and feet are still wrapped in mummy-like bandages. Jesus then turns to the friends and family and says to them, simply (as though this kind of thing happened every day...), “Unbind him and let him go. Unwrap him and set him free.” Presto-chango! Lazarus is back in the game!

In this graphic and dramatic story, two awesome lessons jump out at us. Two great truths emerge that can be very helpful for us today if we take them to heart. First, Jesus wept for and with those whom he loved, and he still does. And second, Jesus raised people up who were thought to be done for...and he still does. When Jesus wept, therefore, he stood against the *seeming* finality and last word of death, because he knew a Heavenly Father for whom death was *not* the last word.

I think Lazarus would appreciate the following story:

Three friends were discussing death, and one of them asked, “What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?”

The first of the friends said: “I would like them to say, ‘He was a great humanitarian, who cared deeply about his community.’”

The second fellow responded, “I would like them to say, ‘He was a wonderful husband and father, and an excellent example for many to follow.’”

But the third friend exclaimed, “I would like them to say: ‘Hey, look! He’s *moving!*’”

So how about you? Are you still moving? Are you still alive and kicking? Or have you gone and gotten yourself stuffed into an early grave by giving up on your hopes and dreams? Has life dealt you an unfair hand, and so you have “folded” instead of playing it out...or drawing more cards? Good Friday is the darkest moment in the Christian church year, for sure, but it is always followed by Easter Sunday, when we celebrate Jesus’ – and *our* – resurrection from premature burial.

Tony Campolo tells the story of an African American preacher in Center City Philadelphia who preached a sermon that Tony says he will never forget. Both he and Tony were preaching at the service that day, and Tony was up first. “I was *hot*,” says Tony, “so hot that I even stopped and listened to *myself*.” Feeling very impressed with himself, he sat down after concluding his sermon and whispered to the other preacher: “Now see if you can top *that* one!”

“Son,” said his older colleague, “you ain’t seen *nothin’* yet...” Then – for the next hour and a half – the pastor repeated these words over and over again: “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s a comin’.”

“I’ve never heard anything like it,” Campolo recalled. “He just kept saying it, and the congregation was spellbound by the power of it.”

“It’s Friday. Mary, Jesus’ mother, is crying her eyes out. That’s her son up there on the cross. He’s dying the agonizing death of crucifixion as a criminal. But it’s only Friday,” the preacher said. “Sunday is a comin’.”

“The apostles were really down and out. Jesus, their leader, was being killed by evil men. But it’s only Friday. Sunday is a comin’.”

“He went on like that for thirty minutes...forty minutes...an hour. Each time he said, ‘It’s Friday,’ the congregation began to respond, ‘but Sunday’s a comin’.’ Then an hour and fifteen minutes passed, but he went on:”

“It’s Friday, and evil has triumphed over good. Jesus is *dying* up there on the cross. The world is turned upside down. This shouldn’t happen. But it’s only Friday! Sunday’s a comin’!”

“It’s Friday. But Sunday is a comin’. Mary Magdalene was out of her mind with grief. Her Lord was being killed. Jesus had turned her life from sin to grace. Now he was dead. But...it’s only Friday! Sunday is a comin’!”

**The place was rocking, Campolo says. For an *hour and a half*: “Friday! But Sunday is a comin’. Friday. But Sunday is a comin’.”**

**“The sisters and the brothers are suffering. It just isn’t fair...all they have to go through...but it’s only Friday. Sunday is a comin’.”**

**“I was exhausted,” Tony said. “It was the best sermon I’ve ever heard. The old preacher was saying it, and the people were right there with him: ‘It’s Friday, but Sunday is a comin’.’ It was powerful,” Tony said. “It was personal.”**

**So it is with our Lord, my friends; he is very powerful and very personal. So do not allow yourself to be buried in whatever babba-sticky would overwhelm you. “Come forth!” he says to you and to me.**

**This coronavirus, or covid-19, or whatever else it may be called by, has been with us for too long already, and our lives are feeling pretty dark. It feels a lot like Friday. But remember: Sunday is a comin’!**

**There is isolation, lack of warm contact with family and friends, cabin fever, and fear of what’s coming next. But it’s only Friday. Sunday is a comin’!**

**There is mistrust of the administration, an unstable financial market as we have entered a recession, suspicion of the motivations of our government leaders even when they try to do the right thing because of their past failures, and we don’t like the uncertainty of the direction our country – and even the world – is taking. But it’s only Friday, and Sunday is a comin’!**

**Yes, the devil has his Friday, but the Lord’s in charge of Sunday, and we will again experience Sunday together someday! Offer a halleluia as though you believe it, because you should! God does not fail us; not now, not ever. Not when we are looking for Sunday to come....**

### **Pastoral Prayer**

**Creator God, there are some days when we feel like our dreams have died and our hopes are lost or buried somewhere. At such times we feel that your Spirit, which blows where it will, has passed us by. We have become dry bones.**

**Something within us, which we cannot name or put a finger on, has disappeared and, like Lazarus, we lie bound in the dark and cold of our personal tomb.**

**We confess, O God, that oftentimes when we find ourselves in such a predicament it is because we have not been receptive to your presence. We ignore the winds of your Spirit and the light of your promise to be with us in all the times of our lives. We become unloving and unlovable, like lifeless, dry bones strewn in the desert. In these times, you weep over us, as Jesus wept with compassion for Lazarus, yearning to draw us back to your endless stream of love and mercy.**

**And so today we unite in prayer, though we are divided by distance, as we seek to be open to your presence and to be receptive to your Spirit that dwells in our midst, for you, O Lord, create opportunities for growth in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves. Help us, then, by your power, to overcome the darkness and the fear we now feel, so that we may become more than conquerors in your name. May the magnitude of our current problems and challenges not weaken our resolve to trust in you, nor our resolve to be creative participants in positive change.**

**Resurrect us. Make us new. And so give us hearts of courage that we may call others and be encouragers of them as well. Help us to be supportive of those who grieve, those who are ill, those who are incarcerated, those who are depressed, those who are unemployed or underemployed, those who are suffering broken relationships, and those who simply feel they have lost their way in life. May their souls, and ours, rest in your promise of new possibilities, and in the newness of life which you continually make available to us. For we pray these things in the mighty name of Jesus, our risen Lord and Savior. Amen.**