

**New life in unexpected places**  
 Ezekiel 37: 1-14 & John 11: 1-27, 38-44  
 March 9, 2008 – Rev. Jim Cullen

The other day I was driving south over the Bay bridge. As I looked off to the east I saw lots of ice and swirling snow. In the midst of this view I saw a dock. At the end of the dock was a waterslide. It was not too hard to imagine young and old sliding down into the water. In the midst of a cold winter day in February it is possible to find the sight of a coming season, not just spring but the hot days of summer.

There is another place where water and land come together that has a message for us. It is Peggy's Cove on the south shore of Nova Scotia. As you drive along the curving highway out of Halifax the scenery is typical – hills and valleys, glimpses of water and so many trees. Then it all changes - rocks and more rocks – nothing but rock. You could be on the moon or some distant planet. There on the rocks, at the head of Margaret's Bay is the lighthouse and the tiny fishing village of Peggy's Cove. We have been there in the warm quiet days of summer and at the end of a mind hurricane in the fall. The experience is nothing less than awesome. While it doesn't seem to fit the rest of the landscape, it offers a sense of permanence and stability. There is the assurance that life goes on from generation to generation.

The lessons for the Fifth Sunday in Lent stand out like a waterslide on a winter dock or the solid rocks of Peggy's Cove. When we hear the gospel story, we are reminded that there was one special place that was a home to Jesus. It was a house east of Jerusalem, near the slope of Mount Olives. Three people lived there, two sisters and a brother. We know something about the sisters, very little about the brother.

There are stories of how a very tired Jesus would visit them. Martha would invite him into their home. Martha – caring, extroverted, practical. And Mary – very different, reflective, quiet, perhaps timid. Whether Lazarus was nearby, we are not sure. But we know that this was a place where Jesus was surrounded with friendship.

In today's story we learn of how Jesus heard of Lazarus' illness and then his death. He was out of the city. He was being warned that people were looking for him. His life was in danger. He delayed his return to Bethany where his friend lived. When Jesus finally arrives he finds out that Lazarus has been dead for four days. His sisters are upset with Jesus. Martha says, "***If you had been here, my brother would not have died***". Being a friend of Jesus does not take away the hurt that comes from losing a loved one.

Where we go from here is up to the reader. There is more to this than a story about Lazarus coming out of a tomb, wrapped in the clothes of death, more that the sisters having to experience two bereavements and pay for two funerals for the same brother. While we would like the historical facts, we are moved beyond it. There is a sense that Jesus own death and resurrection are written between the lines. There is a sense that the world is a cemetery and into the world God sends Jesus as the offer of resurrection – the offer of new life and hope.

Earlier John records how people wanted bread and Jesus offered them ***the bread of life***. The woman at the well wanted water and Jesus offered her ***living water***. The sisters wanted a living brother but Jesus offered ***life*** to the world through his own death and resurrection.

The OT lesson goes back to 597 BCE. The people of Israel are in exile in Babylon (Iraq to us). Their home town, Jerusalem, had been destroyed. Moreover the

temple was in ruins – the temple where they believed God to be most present. Their nation was no more. Without land and with out temple, the exiles considered themselves to be at the end of the road. They were on a journey from freedom to captivity. They doubted they would ever see their Promised Land again.

It is to these hopeless people that Ezekiel promises the vision described in our passage today. Brought *by the spirit* to a valley of dry bones he is asked by God whether these bones can live. The logical answer is, no. But Ezekiel, knowing the creative power of God answers, *you alone know*.

New life comes in two stages. There is the physical renewal, rebirth. But that is not enough. God’s spirit is not tied to one piece of land, not contained in the Temple alone. Nor does God plan to give up on people who face great difficulties.

It took years for stories like this one to be gathered. Passed on from person to person, they finally were written down. Worship patterns were established in the Synagogues. The practice started in these days of despair. They gathered in groups to worship and hear the reading of the scriptures, a practice that has sustained both Jewish and Christian communities down through the years.

These lessons this morning are filled with the promise of Easter. While we are not there yet, we are encouraged to see the signs of hope and promise along the way. There are times for all of us when we feel that we are in the tomb with Lazarus or we are just a bunch of dry bones – focusing on what we no longer have. It is in the very midst of such an experience that God offers us a future. Sometimes the future does not look like the future we expected or wanted, yet it can have the seeds of strength that can be long lasting.

St. Augustine who lived 354-430 who once said, “*Without God we cannot, but without us God will not*”. On one hand God offers us the resources for the future, but also has expectations of us. Augustine is saying that there is a lot in this world that God wants to do but it only happens if we are willing in partners.

About 35 years ago a group of us decided that it would be a good thing to have a cemetery in our community. Because government rules made it difficult to establish a new cemetery it was agreed that it would be easier to “reactivate” a closed cemetery and add to it. The paper work was done; volunteers moved rocks, shoveled, raked and planted grass seed. There was a lot of life in this restored cemetery. There was life in the spirit of those working together. There was hope that this would be a place where people could honour their loved ones. I remember the new life that was involved in establishing the Sophiasburgh cemetery. Near the front of the cemetery there is a plaque with the words of dedication I used those many years ago.

Look for life in unexpected places – a waterslide on a frozen dock, a lighthouse on a barren rock, in a cemetery with trees and flower and soft grass. And we can hear the words of our Creed, “In life, in death, in life beyond death. God is with us.