

“I’m Alive” –Easter Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison (4/1/18)

Church of the Covenant

While at a meeting with pastors, I recently heard someone wisely say, “Conservative Christians probably need to hear more about the compassionate Jesus who believed in social justice, and liberal Christians probably need to hear more about the resurrection, that God is in the business of bringing dead things to life.” I chuckled when I heard it, only because in many ways it is true. Sometimes in our cynicism we forget the power of the resurrection, the idea of God bringing something from death to life. Maybe deep down we want to, but we haven’t let ourselves commit fully to the notion of miracles. We’ve had too many disappointments in life to suddenly believe in fantasies. But, there is little doubt, that within each of us exists an deep desire to believe, to *truly* believe. We want to. We want to see resurrection. Not only in the resurrected person of Jesus, but a personal resurrection within ourselves.

Pablo Neruda, the famous Chilean poet, once wrote:

*He who does not travel, who does not read,
who does not listen to music,
who does not find grace in himself,
she who does not find grace in herself,
dies slowly.*

There is something to be said about depriving ourselves of simple moments of lucidity, moments of clarity, moments of love. We need it. We crave it. Without it we are fulfilling what some would creatively call, “dying daily” as we draw closer to our mortal end. I, however, embrace a different ideology, a different view of this journey, as many of you would also... and it differs in more than just terminology. We say, instead, that we are “living daily” as we approach our eternal beginning. Some would compare this to the “glass half full versus glass half empty” analogy. But I think this goes much deeper than that. It bears down into the very essence of who we are, our very soul, and how we choose to live this life on earth. Are we fatalists, wallowing in our demise, disinterested in communing let alone protecting and nurturing our relationships with both nature and humankind—or are we liberationists, believers of an empowered ability to choose our own fate, and to choose to be the change-agent within our community and world, symbiotically moving within ever interactive circles of life, both ecological and social? Do we choose death or do we choose life?

This question has remerged over and over throughout time, both historically and for most of us personally. Regarding the children of Israel, during the time of the prophet Ezekiel, for many their fate seemed sealed: Exile in bondage. This was not the first time the Israelites had been defeated and taken as slaves, and here they were yet again suffering in a foreign land, a thousand miles away, cut-off from their homeland, their Temple, their Holy City. In time, they viewed themselves as the walking dead, desperate and doomed. There seemed to be no hope in sight. This is when God chose to give Ezekiel a vision. He showed the prophet the valley filled with dried bones, nothing fresh, but everything old and weathered. How many of us can look at our own lives and find places deep in the recesses of our hearts, deep in the valleys and crevices, their tucked away fossilized pain—disappointments, traumas, resentments—places so buried that the effect is sheer hardened death? Memories, feelings, experiences so memorialized in negative energy that their very remembrance causes you to shut-down

and die emotionally... We each have these hidden away, personal valleys of dry bones. We know this kind of death well. We have lived with it our whole lives. In fact, many of us have become accustomed to its presence when it does decide to surface, and often accept the paralysis that accompanies it.

Author and Activist Marianne Williamson writes, “We do not heal the past by dwelling there; we heal the past by living fully in the present.” When God takes Ezekiel to the valley to see the bones strewn everywhere, he does not do it with the purpose of having him dwell on the bones. It isn’t a funeral. Ezekiel doesn’t fall to his knees and weep. Instead, the focus isn’t on the dead bones at all, instead it is on the transformation of the bones from death to life. God brings them back to life! This is the theme. This is the resurrection we crave. God is giving a vision of hope to be relayed to the suffering children of Israel: “You will be restored”.

Emotional and spiritual restoration is often our goal within a community of faith. We come to church to find fellowship, sure. To worship as a community, of course. But to be personally restored, this is mandatory. To expose the dead-spots in our life, the calloused places that hide our weaknesses, our failures, our private pain, and then to see new life breathed into particular areas of our lives—replacing them with new tissue, new skin—this is the key to spiritual growth. This is resurrection. The theme of restoration is a common one, again, both historically and personally. It isn’t anything new. Ezekiel’s vision happened over 2,500 years ago, and is still relevant today. Jesus’ resurrection happened two thousand years ago and we celebrate it to this day, and our resurrection is happening daily, and we should celebrate it daily. Repeat after me: I’m alive. I’m alive.

This is the phrase we often use to remind us of the gratitude that embodies us, a gratefulness to still be alive. Last Wednesday I was driving down 501 towards Timberlake Road. Another car raced in front of me and then slowed down suddenly, causing me to hit my brakes. I saw the Christian symbol on the back of the trunk and my mind immediately went into “judgement mode”. Then almost as quickly I saw a bumper sticker just to the right of it, which instantly disarmed my brain. It said, “Sorry, God’s still working on me”. It’s amazing how a phrase can bring instant peace to a tumultuous heart. We have to repeat phrases and words that hold meaning to us to unlock truth for us in our lives, and “I’m alive” or “I’m awake” are wonderful ones to work with. I sometimes use the “I’m alive” phrase as a vocal and mental cue to trigger my focus during contemplative prayer. As I repeat it, I find myself drifting into a peaceful ocean of presence, where God and I meet, where my thoughts abstain and I can finally listen.

“I’m alive”, surely the words Jesus uttered to his disciples as they stared at him in his moment of resurrection. “Your alive?” “Yes, I’m alive.” God is in the business of defeating death. Death has often been our enemy, our anchor into ineffective living. It’s in our language. If you work hard, people say, “Don’t work yourself to death.” If you come home tired after a hard day working, you say “I’m dead tired.” And then if you fall asleep after working so hard and then being so tired afterward, and you just can’t seem to wake up so easily in the middle of the night (as it is often with me unfortunately), then your wife may lovingly describe you as “dead to the world” or “dead asleep”. Either way, “death” is almost synonymous with “ineffectiveness”, and the question is: Would you rather be dead or would you rather be alive?

And if “being alive” is our answer, which I am almost sure it most always is, then we must adopt a way of living that looks boldly at the “dead bones” within our lives and knows that God is going to breathe new life into them. But we must speak life into them. Just as God commanded Ezekiel speak to the bones, we too must speak into them as say: Dry bones, come back to life. And then in that moment, we must

believe that new life can be breathed back into them. You may have to repeat the powerful words again and again, “I’m alive. I’m alive”, and believe that flesh will surely return to the bones—and we will see life as daily living and not daily dying anymore. However, it begins with us. We must rest in this truth: Life begins with our decision to live, and just like Jesus, we must boldly proclaim it: “I’m alive”. Once we come to this personal conclusion for ourselves, then our individual resurrection can permeate into those around us, helping resurrect our communities and even our world—with the hopes of one day hearing a resounding proclamation to this end: “We’re alive, together!”