

BEINGS TOWARD LIFE**Scripture Readings:** Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45**Texts:** Ezekiel 37:11-14; John 11:33-40

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is a Crusader church, looking very much like a fortress though it is a little hard to tell in the crowded confines of the Old City in Jerusalem. The building is quite huge and divided between the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox. The Calvary side is under the care of the Roman Catholics and it probably fits our conceptions of a medieval church, cramped and overly ornate with gold adornments, and reeking (IMHO) of incense.

The tomb side (i.e., the sepulcher) falls under the care of the Orthodox Church. The space is relatively austere—at least, until you get into the tomb. The tomb is a small edifice located in the center of this very spacious room. One gets in a line to order to get inside the edifice.

Even though you have to climb stairs to get to the Calvary side and walk a good distance to get to the sepulcher, I found it very hard to visualize the geography of the place. I have since read articles that show how the landscape was changed in order to construct the building, it is hard to picture it while inside. I can understand how some doubt that the church actually sits on the “real” site of the crucifixion and resurrection.

So I can understand when General Charles Gordon in the 19th century declared the “garden tomb” with its late Byzantine tomb as the “real” site and handed it over to the care of the Anglican Church. The site fits our images of a tomb carved out of rock in the midst of a garden...and the Anglican Church goes to great lengths to maintain the illusion even down to a flat round stone propped by the door.

Though as one commentator wondered: why all this interest in a space where Jesus spent less time than we spend in a hotel room while on vacation? There is no holy sepulcher because Jesus is resurrected and the commentator wonders if the attention—and even the willingness of the Crusaders to go to war to wrest the sepulcher from infidels—arose out of the idea of what Martin Heidegger called ‘beings toward death.’

Heidegger had reformulated the Platonic idea of objectivism toward our existence by stating that humans use a combination of the objective and subjective to conceptualize our existence. When we humans think about who we are, we are drawn

to the future; no matter what happens in our living, we know that we will die, we face nonbeing.

Thus, 'beings toward death' captures our paradox; even while we exist, we cannot escape the reality that we will also be non-being. This paradox can cause us to focus on the very thing we want to avoid. In a social context we create very elaborate ways to perpetuate forms of denial that each of us individually will come to non-existence. These forms can range from the acquisition of 'wealth' (however we might measure it) to scapegoating/sacrificing "outsiders" (however we might define them) in order to fill our desire for continued existence. In our fear of death/non-being, we fail to fully live.

This failure to live can help us understand the most uncomfortable part of the reading from the gospel of John. When Jesus sees Mary and the Judeans weeping, our English translation says that Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. The Greek conveys something different (and translations in other languages do a better job): Jesus was angry (the Greek word is *neate*; it carries the sound of the snort of a warhorse going into battle) and troubled. Why do English language translators have trouble with Jesus being angry? Maybe it's the situation; shouldn't Jesus be more sympathetic to Mary? All I can say is that I have been to enough funerals to know that in the midst of emotional intensity, all sorts of feelings surface, why not anger?

Of course, with Jesus being so intently angry, all sorts of speculation arises as to why. Some suggest that Jesus is upset at the lack of faith; others say, angry at the power of sin in the world; one early church philosopher thought it was because Jesus hated to reveal the Messianic secret while later thinkers thought it was the intrusion of the Judeans on what should have been an intimate moment for Jesus and the sisters of Lazarus.

The one that worked for me came from Gil Bailie. Bailie noticed that the gospel writer used a different word for Jesus' weeping than was used for Mary and the Judeans. Jesus' weeping describes a spontaneous act while Mary and the Judeans participate in ritual wailing. This ritual wailing was often used as a catharsis in sacrificial cults or in revenge rituals. The death becomes the focal point and promises an ongoing circle of death.

Jesus, on the other hand, does not want his followers to embrace this kind of thinking—such thinking embraces beings toward death. Rather Jesus wants his followers to become beings toward life, those who understand the gift of boundless life of resurrection. Rather than fearing scarcity or non-being, Jesus invites us to

embrace the abundance of God's good gifts in creation. Jesus demonstrates that in God life is a gift shared, not one hoarded only for ourselves.

I think Jesus weeps because the Judeans used his invitation to abide in life, 'Come and see,' as an invitation to abide in death; yet, ironically, they capture the power the resurrection when they observe Jesus' tears and say, "See how he is loving him." Jesus performs this sign not as a miracle to 'wow' the crowd, but as an act to change the orientation of those watching from death to life.

The gospel story is not a new invitation; we can hear in it the vision parable of Ezekiel. Ezekiel addresses people lost in despair; they have lost power, home, wealth, and purpose in the Exile in Babylon. As the poet of Psalm 137 writes: 'By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down there and wept.' The poet goes on to describe the despair of loss and shame, and concludes with a revenge fantasy—beings toward death. But Ezekiel changes the imagery from dry dusty bones to life restored by God—life is not revenge but trust that God can redeem even the dustiest of bones.

Ezekiel's vision parable and Jesus' response to our struggle to become beings toward life remains an ongoing challenge. Recent reports show that over the last decade the mortality rate for non-Hispanic white middle aged people has risen for the first time since these kind of measures have been recorded. This increase has been dramatic for people with less than high school educations. This rise in mortality has been tagged as 'despair deaths.' What researchers discovered is that these individuals have found it increasingly difficult to find jobs that pay well and so they have become unemployed or underemployed, so they have responded with destructive behaviors such alcohol and opioid addictions, poor diet, increased suicides, and risk taking. These are people who have lost sight of meaning and purpose.

How do we, as a community of faith—ideally as people who are oriented toward life—reach out to those in the midst of despair? How do we share compassion and caring without sounding Pollyannish or smug?

Let us invite others with "come and see" to abide in the life of the Spirit. We have been given an abundant gift of good news imbued with hope and grace; let us share it!

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