

Sermon for Sunday, April 2, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

The valley was quiet, almost too quiet. A few leaves
rustled
in the breeze,
an occasional black shadow
circled
overhead,
but below,
everything
was still.

Red brown dirt showed between the faded clumps of grass — there had been almost no
rain that season —
and scattered here and there
patches of white.

It wasn't until you came real close that you could see them for what they were.

Bones.

Dry bones, crumbling bones, dead bones,
whole and in pieces,
splintered and gnawed,
skulls staring blankly
at the fierce blue sky,
memorial
to some battle long past, like a cemetery laid open to the world.
Plots and mounds
of bones.

And then in the silence
came a SHOUT,
and the bones
began to move.

Just a little bit at first,
the hint of movement
as if an army of ants
were underneath.

And then a rustling sound, and a grating,
and a scraping and grinding,

one dragging across the other,
and the bones began to form
recognizable shapes,
a foot here
an arm there
and even the beginnings of a spine.
Bone upon bone
upon bone,
and as they formed
there sounded an unearthly clatter.

And then the sound
became muffled again,
and there seemed to be a thickening around the bones.
Strands began to form,
long sinews
pulling the bones into place, muscles filling out,
and then fat,
and skin,
until there lay in the middle of that red brown dust
an army of bodies,
as if they were
fresh dead.

And another SHOUT
and the army rose,
standing rank upon rank of the living
dead.

He had been dead
four days,
four long days. His body had cooled and stiffened as they wrapped it,
and they had said their goodbyes,
as they placed it carefully in the tomb.
And left to mourn all that could have been
but instead was lying
cold in that tomb.
Four long days

it had been
and it had just begun to sink in
that he was gone.

And then came the order.
Open the grave!
But it had been four days,
96 hours
for the worms and maggots to do their work.
And they knew
what they would find.
So they wrapped cloth
around their faces
to try to block out
the stench,
they felt the muscles in their stomachs lurch
in anticipation,
and they pulled away
the stone.
And stood,
waiting.

At first
it was silent,
and then there was a rustling
and a flapping,
and the muffled pad of feet.
And suddenly there came staggering out of the tomb
a mummy,
grave clothes flapping
in the breeze.

Ghost stories, bones and bodies, dead men walking.
They're hardly
what we expect
to hear at church.
And it seems flippant, almost trivial,
to tell ghost stories from the pulpit.

As far as I can remember, being brought up in a good Christian family,
ghost stories
were not encouraged.
Ghost stories
were dangerous.
Ghost stories were dabbling
in evil.

And in part
my parents were right.
Because there are things
which are not of God,
there are forces
which are truly evil,
and we can all too easily
be caught up in them.

But ghost stories
can serve another purpose.
Because ghost stories
if nothing else
are honest
about our fears, ghost stories
enable us to face up to
the reality of death
and the possibility of life
on the other side,
however strangely
they may portray it.

And Scripture
tells ghost stories
with the best of them,
ghost stories worthy
of Edgar Allen Poe.
The valley of dry bones
in Ezekiel.
The resuscitation of Lazarus
in the gospel of John.
In the hands of Alfred Hitchcock

they would be pure horror.
In the hands of Christ
they are pure hope.

Because ghost stories
are stories
of death
and life,
stories about the uncertain boundary
between the two.
And it's on that uncertain boundary
that we walk
and Christ with us.

When I was a child
death seemed to be far away. The first family death that I remember
was my great-grandmother's,
and only my mother went to the funeral.
We were too young.
The first body I saw
was my grandmother,
stiff and cold in her casket, more like a wax figure
than the living, breathing, loving
person that I knew.

But adulthood
has brought death closer, not only as my grandparents' generation has died
but as the media saturation of our lives
brings death
vividly close.

Who can forget the images
of September 11,
bodies etched against the sky
as they fell from buildings as if from an absurdly high diving board,
families pinning up faces at railway stations and on the sides of buildings
in the vain hope
that someone
might recognize them; that somehow they had escaped.

And the child lying as if abandoned
on the beach in Turkey,
having escaped the fear of death in Syria
only to die on the journey.

Or just yesterday,
two hundred fifty four people killed
in flooding and mudslides in Colombia
through perhaps we have become almost immune to this sort of disaster,
because it didn't even make the front page
of any of our New York newspapers.

None of them
expected to die.

Death is all around us,
as much as we would like to deny it,

At the beginning of Lent the words
“of dust you were made
and to dust
you shall return”

reminded us once again
of the fragility
of our own lives,
and the contingency
of our own survival.
Disasters in our world and in our lives
bring it home to us.

But the reality is that
that is the world
we have always lived in;
that is the world
where car accidents, and war, and famine reigned unchecked.
Most of us have simply been lucky
enough
to have escaped it.

We have always walked on that uncertain boundary between life and death
only we too often have forgotten it.

We have forgotten
that life is fragile,
we have forgotten
that life is a gift,
we have forgotten
that the one true certainty for each of us
is death.
Of dust we are made
and to dust
we shall return.

But while we walk that uncertain
boundary
between life and death
there is another certainty.
And that is
that while death is certain
life is even more
sure.

Not because of anything we can do, but because of something
we had no hand in at all, something that happened
long before we first entered life.
On the Passover, at 3pm
just under 2000 years ago,
when a man hung
on a cross
and breathed his last
struggling breath.

We preach
Christ crucified, said the apostle Paul,
we preach the story
of a dead guy.
Is there anything more crazy?

But it's the story of a dead guy
who was not held captive

to death,
the story of a dead guy
whose death was only the beginning.

You see, our story of a dead guy
is our ghost story, the one great ghost story in which
evil
doesn't have a chance,
the one great ghost story
of a cool spring morning
when the uncertain boundary between death and life
was forever erased
and life
had the last word
for all time.
"I am the resurrection and the life!"

And the ghost stories I told today, from Ezekiel, and the gospel of John
are just a taste
of that greatest ever ghost story,
our own stories
as we walk that uncertain line between death and life
wait for completion in that great story.
We taste
the beginning of that life,
but the best
is yet to come.

But it isn't easy,
living on that uncertain line;
it isn't even easy
moving into that new life.
Lazarus staggered out of the tomb
grave clothes, bandages, flapping. It must have been like
a second birth, and one which would not leave him
unchanged.
Because something
had died,

and in spite of it
life went on – whether he liked it
or not!
The presence of death touches us
and life can never be the same sort of normal again.
Because once we dare
acknowledge death
our life
will be different. It will have
less arrogance
and more humility;
we will taste sugar and dirt
at the same time;
we will know our own vulnerability
and at the same time
our resilience.
For on that uncertain boundary
between death
and life,
Christ walks with us
the dead guy, with the promise of life,
the power of God
to transform
to breathe life
into our own darkness.

We will never
be safe
from death
never safe from fear.
But in the great ghost story,
Christ walks beside us,
bringing comfort
and life in the uncertain boundary lands
between life
and death.

We bind ourselves to that Christ
wherever our God will take us
into danger

and into safety
into death
and into life
into Good Friday
and into Easter.