

Unbelievably Beautiful

What beautiful readings today! I'm sure you were thinking about that, not about your feet, knees, and back as you stood for so long in that Gospel reading ya?

I think these readings today are just that: beautiful. In the middle of lent we have glimmers, no, bright beams of hope and resurrection that come to us. And I dare say then that these readings are unbelievably beautiful. Unbelievably.

God asks Ezekiel if the dry bones can live again. He says, "O Lord God, you know."

What kind of answer is that?

It's an answer that, I think, is saying, "No I don't think these bones can live, that's stupid. But.... I am also in the presence of the Omnipotent Maker of all, which is pretty unbelievable in itself, so who knows, He knows, maybe they can live?"

And then God works his unbelievable beauty and the dust comes back into sinew and flesh and the breath of life comes anew.

It's the same in the Gospel lesson. Verse 23 "Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Which is a beautiful confession of faith from Martha, but misses the unbelievable intention of Jesus to raise Lazarus up THAT day.

It happens again with Mary, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” A great confession, again, of Jesus’ power to *heal*. But we can’t expect you to raise him from the dead... that’s not possible, or, at the least, far too much to ask.

There is a final, thematic, third protest to the unbelievable beauty Jesus would show them. Verse 39: “Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.’”

What is that a confession of? It’s a confession of the victory of death and decay and maggots. That’s what it is a confession of. And it’s a confession that we have a hard time refuting don’t we? Death, decay, and maggots seem to have the final word when we look around right? That person dies and guess what you don’t get to hug them or talk to them anymore. It’s not hard to figure out.

And they knew it too.

But then God shows his unbelievable beauty. He shows his mighty victory. The dead... live.

And in this we then see the world changed, we see the world in a new light.

Literally with light. With Hope. Suddenly now the Church is more than robes and

candles and moralism, suddenly now it is a bastion of Gospel good news, more relevant than anything else in a dying world.

But I suppose then, the question is, how do you receive such resurrection?

Allow a rough transition to our epistle reading.

At the risk of driving down a Roman Road, I want to bring us back a few chapters.

Paul begins his letter by saying we are all lost and sinful, then he shares the beautiful Gospel of Jesus and how we are saved by grace through faith. But how can you know you believe? Paul in chapter 6 invites us to reflect on our baptisms that “unite us with the death and resurrection of Jesus.” We read those very verses today! So yes, all who believe are saved, but baptism, along with that faith, is how you can *know* you are a Christian, that you are “in Christ” as he says so often. And the objections come out, well what of those who are baptized and have fallen away, but no, that’s a different question, because I could ask, have you fallen away? And you may say in the dark times, I don’t know – that’s what worries me! And my response then is, well if you’re worried, you haven’t. If you have fallen away, you wouldn’t care. But here you sit, and we will stand and confess, and the water washed on your head. What a beautiful promise!

Yet even we want to protest this news that we are in Christ. “But Paul, we still sin!” His answer in Romans 7, “yes you do, and so do I, but Christ saves us from

this body of death.” And THEREFORE - as we see at the beginning of Romans 8 now – “*Therefore* there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” And while that might not be “dead being raised” unbelievably beautiful, well it isn’t far off is it?

“There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.” Do you believe that? That you with your sins, that you still fight and struggle with, that you did yesterday and will do again today. Do you believe there is no condemnation for them, that God looks at you, who are in Christ, don’t forget romans 6, now, that he sees you as perfect and wouldn’t imagine giving you anything but life?

I look at my heart and mind and insincerity and I find that hard to believe. And I think if you put a pile of bones in front of me and told me if they could live I might find that hard to believe too.

And so we, I think, are as guilty as the people of old. We know there is a Creator, we know he is strong and good, but will that stuff really happen? Will dust and ash and bone and decay really live again? Is that sin, that stupid regret, really washed away? We see the effects of our decisions, our sins, our age, our decay all around us. Can it really be made new?

The testimony of Ezekiel, of Lazarus, of Paul, of the cross, of Easter, I know we aren’t there yet, but the testimony of those is: yes. Yes it can happen, yes it will

happen. Because folks, these readings today are not unbelievably beautiful if they aren't true. If they aren't true they are hideous shams, fables, lies, coping mechanisms. And those aren't beating death, sin, and maggots. Not even close.

But a real God, a Real Savior can.

Because of Christ's work on the cross there is no, zero, condemnation for the believer for his Children. It's double jeopardy, it's a bill that's paid, it's a receipt in the hand, it's a crime with no evidence, it's a false equivalency, a redundancy, it cannot happen, the verdict cannot and will not go out. That is what Paul is saying. He saying, "Ya I know you sin, I do too. Irrelevant, dismissed, mistrial. It doesn't apply." And we might think that a miscarriage of justice, "evil got off-scott free." Oh no it didn't. Look at the cross. Imagine nails in the hands, blood, exposed bone and flesh. Scott free? Not hardly. In fact, I have a challenge for you, come to Good Friday service in two weeks, then tell me evil got away. No, on the cross justice is carried out, condemnation is carried out, but not on you. On Him.

You... go free and unto life. That's it. What you do with your freedom, that is of no concern to the courts, it is not noted in the minutes, or the ledger. They do not care how the freed person celebrates, what they eat, where they live. It is no longer their concern it is no longer in their jurisdiction. So I suppose a question to ask then, is

what you, Christian who is free of condemnation and awaiting eternal life, are going to do? I suggest: rejoice! And live your eternal life now!

Now will that life, until the Lord calls us home, be free from sin or hardship? No.

But then go back to romans 6, 7, and 8 again. And rejoice anew. And perhaps then, as freed Christians, might we give a thought to the one who paid our ransom, who took our condemnation, and seek a relationship with him and to do his will even if the world rages against it? That might be a good way to say thank you, yes. But make no mistake, the verdict is already out. The freedom given. Why put the chains back on?

You are in Christ. Live in him. Do His will. And when you fail, come hear the unbelievable good news again, that he would die for you.

Until that hardship hits real hard and you die. What do we do then? Well, if you are the one dying, that's actually really simple. Because by the time you know you're dead, you will already know the answer to "can those bones live again? And "am I forgiven?" Because you will find yourself with the Savior in love and peace.

Questions answered. Rejoicing beginning. And I think you will say, "God, you, and your mercy, and your victory, and your will, and your ways, and your salvation.. it is all so beautiful." Until that day, may we rejoice in the unbelievable, but true, beauty of his Word and Work for us.

