

When We Fear We Are Hoping For Too Much

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 23, 2021
based on Ezekiel 37:1-14*

A number of years ago, a man named Peter Niewiek learned he had cancer. He'd been the pastor of the Oak Hills Christian Reformed church here in Beaverton back in the late 1970s. His doctors told him that even though they believed his disease to be treatable, Peter's prognosis was uncertain. More tests were needed and genetic analysis had to be done.

So, Peter began that very difficult period between getting an initial diagnosis and beginning treatment. During that time he felt his life to be very out of control. He'd be perfectly fine and then, out of no where he was in a panic. He hardly ate. His wife, always the optimist, insisted they go on with their usual activities and try to act as normal as possible. She recommended a hike around a mountain lake they'd never visited. Two friends were invited to join them.

The lake was everything it was said to be. They even stumbled upon a rustic mountain lodge above the lake and were so taken by it that Peter's wife tried to book a room for the following weekend. She was told, however, that the lodge was so popular that they didn't have a single vacancy until the same month the next year. She came out, told Peter and the friends the situation and said she was going to go ahead and make a reservation anyway.

Well, while she was booking it, Peter broke down in front of his friends. He said, *"Look at this place! The trees, the lake, the mountain – they're all so permanent! And I have never felt so mortal! And here, Susan is making reservations for next year. I may not be here next year! I'd love to come, but I'm afraid to hope for that much!"*

I'm afraid to hope for that much.

2400 years ago the prophet Ezekiel had a vision in which he felt summoned by the spirit of God to walk a valley of bones. Some of us remember the song??

"Knee bone connected to the . . . thigh bone. Thigh bone connected to the . . . " But that doesn't really say it. These aren't just bones needing connecting. These are dry bones. These are bones with no marrow; bones that are bleached, hollowed out, and scattered by the thousands.

They represent the nation of Judah in 597 BCE which has been demolished by the gargantuan super-power, Babylon. The elite from Judah, in fact, are on their way to exile there.

On their way out of Jerusalem they see the smoke rising from what remains of their holy temple. They wonder if they will ever worship as they did before.

Years fly by and they wonder if they will always be in Babylon. The pages of their old hymnbooks are getting pretty yellow and worn.

They wonder: How much ought we to hope? It seems "we are clean cut off."

Dry, marrowless, disconnected bones. "Come on, how much hope can we really afford to have?" Because frankly, sometimes it's painful to go on hoping. Sometimes it's best to just move on; just leave our broken hopes behind and get on with a new life. It starves the heart to hope and hope when all seems lost.

But the text this morning argues that there are times when the spirit of God takes us by the hand and leads us to the private cemetery each of us keep, where the spirit took Ezekiel. It's the same emotional place Jesus took his friends Martha and her sister Mary when their brother Lazarus had died near the end of Jesus's own life.

Both stories challenge us to look more closely at what may be difficult to behold.

Word comes to Jesus that his friend Lazarus is ill. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, live in Bethany, a small hamlet near Jerusalem. They are very good friends, the four of them. There is an easy familiarity between Jesus and the two women. Now, the story is explicit that Jesus delays the visit several days. When he arrives, Lazarus is already dead.

Both Mary and Martha express exasperation that he didn't arrive sooner. The mourners, friends of the family, also wonder what was keeping him. Everyone wants to know if stories of his miraculous powers are true, and if so, why Jesus hasn't exercised some of that power on behalf of his dear friend, Lazarus.

And then, we are told, Jesus wept. In his grief, his eyes still wet with tears, "greatly disturbed," Jesus orders the stone rolled away, even though practical Martha is fussing because of what the delay must mean, her brother being dead for four days.

Undeterred, Jesus shouts into the open grave, "Lazarus, come out of there!" After a pause heavy with expectation, the dead man comes out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth; his face wrapped. And Jesus says to them: "Unbind him and let him go."

Now this is a truly stirring moment. If you listen to that command of his, those words, "unbind him and let him go," I mean, if you really have ears to hear them, you may understand that Jesus is, yes, speaking of Lazarus's winding sheet, but also those fetters that hold *us* captive too – including our fear of hoping for too much in this life.

There in Bethany, Jesus not only raises his beloved friend, he also calls to us, confronting us with all that we have consigned to the tomb in our lives ...

the joy that has gone out of our marriages; a child or grandchild who will no longer listen to us and seems bent on self-destruction, the staleness we may feel in our careers, the feeling of loss that may come in retirement.

We consign these to a part of our heart that is stony, that is tomb-like; the place we bury all the hopes we find too painful to continue nursing.

There we may put a once precious friendship that has foundered, or maybe a hope that we nurtured when we were young that now seems dead.

Something within us whispers a question: "Can these bones live?" And we say, "These bones? They're awfully dry. They've been in the tomb a long time."

Maybe we ought to look somewhere else for signs of life, because we're tired of hoping. We are tired of the pain of carrying these broken dreams, these broken people, the endless broken promises. We grow tired of open wounds that never seem to heal.

And we want to say, "Let it end, please, just let it end" so as to save the rest of our heart that is *not* stony, that is *not* a museum of lost hope.

There are many of us that say, as Martha does, "Well, I know that this relationship with my brother will be revived some day in heaven, but I have trouble believing we'll ever make peace here in this world. Let's just get on with something new."

But you know, there are people in this world who go on hoping against hope longer than one could ever imagine. Solid people. Bright people.

I think of Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. While so many in his country were sure a devastating race war was unavoidable, Bishop Tutu continued to be optimistic.

The day after another massacre of 42 more, murdered in one of the townships, he was asked by a journalist the following question: "Bishop, why do you continue to hold out hope for a peaceful solution to this crisis?"

Bishop Tutu answered, "Because I am a Christian, and a Christian is a prisoner of hope."

Like it or not, that is who we are. That is the Christian legacy. That is the story at the heart of all western Abrahamic religions.

The president says there is a genuine opportunity to craft a real peace between Israel and the Palestinians out of the appalling wreckage of Gaza. How many times have we heard such things? More than I can remember. I want to hope, but geez.

It's Pentecost Sunday, but I'm still mulling over the business of Easter here. I'm slow that way.

The disciples all scattered when Jesus was crucified. He was buried and they put the biggest rock in front of it they could find and that was it. Each went his own way. They began getting on with their lives.

Some of them went fishing. They may not have said a word about him, but I cannot help but believe that they wondered, each in his or her own secret heart, if the one who brought Lazarus back from the dead might himself return.

God knows God's people. God knows the tension we live in the midst of: the tension between the temptation to chuck it all, and the inner compulsion to continue hoping beyond all reasonable hope.

Through God's prophet, Ezekiel, God makes a promise to those people who are tempted to consign their dead nation to the ash heap of history, but can't quite bring themselves to do it.

Through Ezekiel, God says, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezek. 36). What a powerful and confounding metaphor.

A heart of flesh? Thank you, no; give me a heart of *Titanium* maybe, but not a heart of flesh; it's too fragile. It tears too easily. Leave me at least a bit of stony ground to lay to rest what is too painful for me to bear any longer.

And, you know, God allows us that choice.

But in God's time the spirit may someday summon us saying, "What you think is a curse (a fragile heart) is also a blessing. Come and see."

Almost six summers ago hundreds of Americans responded to the Spirit's summons to visit a valley of the dry bones. There is a branch located just back of the bluffs above the beaches of Normandy. There the survivors of D Day gathered for the 70th anniversary. Many came, but the ranks were thinning badly.

One veteran said that for him, it was like being the horse that returns to the burning barn. So painful, but he couldn't stay away.

He was afraid to face it. But he was also afraid of never facing the demons he

left there, at all. The whole business of D Day had been working on him; percolating in him for most of a century. He felt he had to return before it was too late.

Another such veteran was Jim Norene, of Hepner, in Eastern Oregon. Jim had been a paratrooper with the 101st Airborne. He was in poor health, but he made the trip because he felt he had to.

He walked the beaches and combed the cemetery that Friday, June, 5th, reading the stones. Remembering.

And then that night he died in his sleep. Think of that.
We do what we have to do, you and I, to complete a lifetime.

Many of the vets found new hearts in their visit to Normandy; hearts of flesh. It is a painful gift but perhaps it is really what we, at bottom, want most in our lives.

Remember the end of *The Wizard of Oz*?
The Tin Man asks the Wizard for what? – yeah, a heart.

The Wizard says, "You don't know how lucky you are not to have one. Hearts will never be practical until they can be made unbreakable."

And the Tin Man says, "Yes, but I still want one."

The time will come when God will offer a heart of flesh to those of us who are carrying crosses of grief or shame. Why? Because this world isn't about being care-free, day in and day out. Sometimes I wish it was.

No, it's about being alive, about sometimes being terribly vulnerable; about learning what it means that God is faithful in ways we often find painful.

Four weeks ago I left Salt Lake City. The moving van had just finished loading everything I own. I was an hour and a half on the road, I was expecting a call from my daughter, Maggie, in Denver. I knew she was having a routine breast scan that noon.

It should have been done two hours before. "What's going on?" I wondered.

Then comes the call but it's from my son-in-law, her husband, whose name is ... Scott. If I get a call from Scott I know it's because my daughter is in no shape to tell me something I need to know.

The routine scan was bad – very bad. A week later came the biopsy. Aggressive cancer of the breast. Very aggressive. But Wednesday, three weeks in, a PET

scan said it's treatable.

Treatable, but they will have to hit it with everything known to science, which they began doing Thursday. My daughter is being carpet bombed.

I can't tell you how happy and excited I am to be here with you. This move to Southminster has been terrific, but this has also been the worst month of our lives. Nothing else comes close. I don't love anyone as mightily as I love Maggie and my two grandbabies, age 3 and one. I get to see them tomorrow.

Hope.

Remember Peter Niewiek -- the man with cancer who was afraid to hope too much about next year's vacation? Peter didn't get to go to the lodge nestled by that mountain lake the next year.

It wasn't because anything happened to him. His cancer went into sustained remission. No, something happened to the mountain. Because the lodge was called Harmony Falls Lodge. And the lake was called, Spirit Lake. And the mountain was Mount St. Helens. And one day in May of 1980 the lake and the lodge blew away. Forever.

As Peter told his story to any who would hear he testified to both the curse and the blessing of being held prisoner by a thing called hope.

Amen

"I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than history. That dreams are more powerful than facts. That hope always triumphs over experience. That laughter is the only cure for grief. And I believe that love is stronger than death."

— Robert Fulghum

"The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof."

— Barbara Kingsolver, Animal Dreams

Word comes to Jesus that his friend Lazarus is ill. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, live in Bethany, a small town near Jerusalem. They are very good friends, the four of them, apparently. There is an easy familiarity between Jesus and the two women. Against the advice of his disciples, Jesus decides to go to Lazarus's side. But he waits several days. When he arrives, Lazarus is already dead. Both Mary and Martha express exasperation that he didn't arrive sooner. The mourners, friends of the family, also wonder what was keeping him and if what people were saying about his miraculous power were true why he didn't exercise some of it on behalf of his dear friend.

And then Jesus wept. What happened next is difficult for us. Jesus has already told Martha and Mary, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die"—words that we read at every memorial service.

So in his grief, his eyes still wet from his tears, "greatly disturbed" John says, Jesus orders the stone rolled away, even though practical Martha is fussing, busily objecting to the aesthetics of such a thing. And of all things Jesus shouts into the open grave, "Lazarus, come out of there!" Without comment, the story concludes: "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in cloth. Jesus said to them: 'Unbind him and let him go.'" And that's it.

There were two immediate results. People were astonished; people believed in this one who in the name of God restores life, brings life out of death. And the authorities begin to plan in earnest how to get rid of him. Apparently the authority to resist the power of death is a threat to public order or to their authority.

I once had a conversation with Father Lawrence Jenco. That name might not ring a bell with you. He was an a Catholic priest who was held hostage for many months in Lebanon back in the early 1980s. He said that the experience was one of deep loneliness punctuated by stark terror. He spent every day blindfolded and stuck in a dark closet. He related to me the story of one very special night of his captivity; a night in which he was led up to the roof of the building in which he was being held. There, in the cool of an evening breeze, his captors sat him down and began unwinding his blindfold. Fr. Jenco had been told many times

that if the blindfold were ever removed in the presence of his captors it could mean only one thing: immediate execution. And yet what met his wondering eyes was not the sight of a gun, but the most startlingly beautiful vision he had ever seen. His captors had led him to the roof-top to see the full moon spread out over the city of Beirut. It was something he had not laid eyes on in over a year; something he wondered if he might ever see again. It was most beautiful moon he had ever seen. One moment he had felt so close to death, the next he had never felt so alive.

“The world **is** beautiful,” he thought, “and my captors can be kind. Who knew?”

Years ago when he was writing his book, *The Greatest Generation*, the NBC news anchor, Tom Brokaw visited the beaches of Normandy, France. On his first day there he met two veterans of D Day two men who had served in what the Army calls, The Big Red One. One of them had won the Congressional Medal of Honor and the other had lost a leg.

Brokaw asked them what happened there all those years before. They said they were on a landing craft when the big metal ramp went down. Immediately the Lieutenant and Master Sergeant leading them were both shot in the head. That left the 24 men in the craft leaderless. These two made it to the beach and hunkered down behind a tank trap. There they sat for a long time, not knowing what in the world to do.

Eventually, a US Army Colonel came loping along the beach as if he were a tourist. He bent down to speak to them and said, “Fellas, there are only two kinds of men on this beach: the dead, and those about to be dead. You’ve got to keep moving forward.” And that’s what they did. By the end of that afternoon they found themselves together on top of that ridge. They decided then that they would just take it one day at a time. And somehow they got through.

“Unbind him and let him go.” Death teaches us to look for and identify whatever it is that keeps us from living fully. Death teaches us to never be content to be a victim, to stop whining and blaming other people for our problems, to take responsibility for our lives.

Back in the dark ages, when little children were sent to Sunday School to learn Bible stories, the primary pedagogical strategy was memorization. Children memorized Bible verses, and much of the class time was dedicated to the recitation of those verses of scripture. The inducement, the reward for correctly reciting a Bible verse, was a little sticker that the child affixed to an 8x10 picture of, say, a green meadow—the stickers for which would be, appropriately, little lambs—or a flowery garden—the stickers for which would be kittens or puppies. The idea was to recite as many verses as you could memorize and therefore accumulate as many stickers on your picture as possible during the year. So it

was, essentially, underneath it all, competition: head-to-head, nose-to-nose competition, and I loved it. My flowering garden was full of kittens, kittens everywhere, in the grass, on the bushes, up in the trees. I even had a border of upside down kittens around my garden, which was probably a little show-offy. When the competition began, the rule was that a particular verse could be recited just once that day. Without fail the child who was called on first recited John 11:35: “Jesus wept.” Two words. The shortest verse in the Bible until the new translation expanded it by fiddling with the verb: “Jesus began to weep.” But it remains in many memories and many hearts two words: “Jesus wept.”

Jesus wept because his friend Lazarus died. And so, in addition to being the shortest verse in the Bible, it is emotionally and theologically suggestive: Jesus experienced grief. Jesus experienced that most common, most exquisitely painful, of all human experiences, the death of a loved one. Lazarus’s death, and all that entailed, the loss of a treasured friend, a reminder of the brevity and fragility of all human life, a reminder of the inevitability of his own death, which at that very moment was looming on the horizon—it was enough to make a grown man cry.

So Jesus wept. And so have we all.

In his wonderful memoir, *Credo*, William Sloane Coffin thinks out loud in the last chapter, “The End of Life,” about death. Coffin, in his late 70s, is not well himself, so his words have an immediacy about them, and as always, they are wise and human and wry and playful.

“Without death, we’d never live,” Coffin says. “Consider only the alternative—life without death. Life without death would be interminable—literally, figuratively. We’d take days just to get out of bed, weeks to decide ‘what’s next?’ Students would never graduate, faculty meetings and all kinds of other gathering would go on for months.” For one who has already spent a significant portion of his life sitting in meetings, that image of life without death evolving into an endless church committee meeting sounds, frankly, hellish!

Without death, Coffin suggests, “chances are we’d be bored.” So “death cannot be the enemy if it’s death that brings us to life.”

And finally, with a twinkle in his eye: “With no deaths there would long since have been no births, the world being overpopulated with immortal beings. Just think: Giotto maybe, but no Cézanne, let alone Andy Warhol; Purcell maybe, but no Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, let alone Aaron Copland; Roman gladiators yes, but no Sugar Ray Robinson or Mohammad Ali. And, of course, no you and me, no grandchildren!” (pp. 167–168).

“Jesus began to weep” is a small detail in a much larger story: the death and raising of Lazarus. In John’s Gospel, the trajectory of that larger story is turning toward Jerusalem and Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. Word comes to Jesus that his friend Lazarus is ill. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, live in Bethany, a small town near Jerusalem. They are very good friends, the four of them, apparently. There is an easy familiarity between Jesus and the two women. Against the advice of his disciples, Jesus decides to go to Lazarus’s side. But he waits several days. When he arrives, Lazarus is already dead. Both Mary and Martha express exasperation that he didn’t arrive sooner. The

mourners, friends of the family, also wonder what was keeping him and if what people were saying about his miraculous power were true why he didn't exercise some of it on behalf of his dear friend.

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There were two immediate results. People were astonished; people believed in this one who in the name of God restores life, brings life out of death. And the authorities begin to plan in earnest how to get rid of him. Apparently the authority to resist the power of death is a threat to public order or to their authority.

Now at this point, we moderns who have been following right along say, "Wait a minute! Let's go over that again. Things like that just don't happen." And we start going down the road of biological plausibility. After all, lots of people do have near-death experiences and come back, to talk about them on late-night television. Or we go down the road of doctrinal precision: if Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, the second person of the Trinity, he can do whatever he wants to do, including breaking every biological, physiological rule in the book and raising a dead man. As enjoyable as the roads are, however, I want to call us back from them and invite us to ponder the real question, the question that emerges from our Presbyterian way of reading scripture: namely, what is the word of God here? What is God saying to us in this text? What in us is being addressed—or to put it particularly, what in us is being called out? What in us is God calling to get up and walk away from death into life?

Jesus wept. Was Lazarus' death the first experience Jesus had with loss as an adult? Typically, not always, but typically, we sail through the first two or three decades of life; we lose some grandparents and aunts and uncles along the way, and in the fourth decade our lives crash into the reality of death when someone we dearly love dies. The death of a parent comes out of the blue and stuns us and reverberates in our lives every day thereafter. And life is never quite the same again. I love something Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents on Christmas Eve 1943, from his Nazi prison cell:

Nothing can make up for the absence of someone we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a kind of substitute: we must simply hold out and see it through. This sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap: he doesn't fill it, but on the contrary he keeps it empty and so helps us keep alive our communion with each other. (*The Christian Century*, 14 December 20)

Death deepens us, makes us more able to understand and stand with one another. Clergy know that you don't become a pastor until you have picked up a few personal wounds; you can't help people through the valley of the shadow of death until you've been in it yourself.

The death of someone close changes something deep inside. When his dear friend Charles Williams died, C. S. Lewis wrote, "No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that changed" (Robert McAfee Brown, "Meditation on a Particular Death," *The Pseudonyms of God*, p. 159).

Susan Vogel is a dean and professor at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. Her son died in an automobile accident, and she wrote a book about it. She thanks the friend who sent her a quote from Roger Kahn: "The world is never again as it was before anyone you love has died; never so innocent, never so fixed, never so gentle, never so pliant to your will." Everything changed for Vogel, including her theology. Like most of us, she never paid much attention to the phrase in the creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." Now, she writes to her old theology professor, "it has to do with the everlasting life of my son, the resurrection of his body to which I first gave birth. It is not now an esoteric exercise in creedal affirmation. It is my fervent mother-hope that my baby, my firstborn child, is not lost forever, is not lost to me forever, is not lost" (*And Then Mark Died: Letters of Grief, Love, and Faith*, p.17).

"Unbind him and let him go," Jesus commanded of Lazarus, and we hear very little of him again. I found myself wondering, as I thought about this text this time around, "Go where?" Where did Lazarus go? What did he do? Did he live out the rest of his life differently? He must have. Death teaches us how very precious the gift of life is, the gift of our own lives. Reggie Jackson, great baseball player, now coaching, was in an automobile accident last week, hit from behind in Florida, his vehicle flipped over several times. He emerged with a few scratches and bruises and said, "I just learned how good it is to be alive." Death does that: teaches us how very good it is to be alive, teaches us the value of every new day, teaches us gratitude every morning, teaches us to not be wasteful, to make every day count because every day is a gift we did nothing to earn or deserve.

Jane Kenyon was among our most distinguished poets and one of the most beloved poems is "Otherwise":

I got out of bed
on two strong legs
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.

. . .

All morning I did

the work I love.

. . .

We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks.

It might have been otherwise.

I slept in a bed

in a room with paintings

on the wall, and

planned another day

just like this day.

But one day, I know

it will be otherwise.

(from *Otherwise*, Graywolf Press, 1996)

Death teaches us how beautiful and precious life is, teaches us to “number our days” and to live every one of them, to live with our eyes and ears open, to drink it all in, every single day of it.

There’s something of that going on right in front of our eyes as Pope John Paul II simply refuses to stop living every day of his life. The *Tribune* observed that it makes no sense and that for Americans, “with our Puritan-bred devotion to performance review and productivity, the inability to fully do our jobs would be reason enough for most of us to quit.” John Paul II, instead, keeps on living each day, painfully, awkwardly, doing what he knows himself called to do, testifying every painful day, to the truth that human life is precious, that even weak and vulnerable and diminishing, human life has value (editorial, 5 March 2005).

“Unbind him and let him go.” Death teaches us to look for and identify whatever it is that keeps us from living fully. Death teaches us to never be content to be a victim, to stop whining and blaming other people for our problems, to take responsibility for our lives. Down through the centuries, the raising of Lazarus, his walking away from his grave clothes, has brought courage and hope to people living under political oppression, people who understandably knew themselves to be living in the midst of death and who decided not to allow death to have dominion over them. It was a favorite story for American slaves literally bound by their chains and for house churches in Central America, as death squads threatened and brutalized and killed; to blacks living in the nightmare of apartheid in South Africa. And this story can be your promise that Jesus Christ is on the side of life, your life, as you look for the strength and courage to walk away from whatever holds you back, keeps you from living fully the gift of your life.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus said. We have not arrived at Easter yet. As we follow him to Jerusalem in the days ahead, his triumphal entry, his betrayal, arrest, we will come finally to his own encounter with the power of death, his crucifixion. Even now, though, as he walks bravely toward his own death, we can see that he is winning the battle; that death will not defeat him; that in him death itself will be defeated; that love, the love of God that lived in him, will rise to new and everlasting life.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice,” the psalmist wrote.

It is the quintessential human cry, uttered sooner or later by every one of us. We

live with the presence of death daily, the death of our soldiers, the death of innocent civilians, death from terrorist attacks, government-sponsored genocide in Africa, an AIDs pandemic, unnecessary death from hunger, and random death in courtrooms and suburban homes and even a church service, yesterday the deaths of beloved parents. And, of course, our own death. But, we, because we know and trust Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life and who can bring life out of death, we also live with a greater reality, a more powerful power: the love of God, from which nothing, not even death can separate us, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Before every birth and after every death there is still God,” Bill Coffin writes at the end of his memoir. “The abyss of God’s love is deeper than the abyss of death” (pp. 169–172).

In the meantime we are free to live fully and gratefully, every day of the life that is ours, and to know that those who have gone before us are safe in the mercy and love of God.

Marilynn Robinson’s wonderful novel *Gilead* is about an elderly minister who has congestive heart failure and knows he doesn’t have long to live. The Reverend John Ames lost his first wife and infant daughter, Rebecca, years before, but later in life he married again and had another child, a son. The book is his letter to his son, so that the boy will remember his father.

Here I am trying to be wise, the way a father should be, the way an old pastor certainly should be. I don’t know what to say except that the worst misfortune isn’t only misfortune—and even as I write these words, I have that infant Rebecca in my mind, the way she looked when I held her, what I seem to remember, because every single time I have christened a baby I have thought of her again. That feeling of a baby’s brow against the palm of your hand—how I have loved this life. (p. 56).

At the very end, Ames writes, “Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm” (p. 246).

Jesus wept—for the loss of his dear friend, but I think also they were tears of gratitude for the good gift of life, his own life, and the tears of joy in the promise of God’s eternal love, which would keep him through the terrible days ahead, would keep him through the valley of the shadow of death, God’s eternal love that will keep us, and our dear ones, forever.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” he said. “Those who believe in me, though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Word comes to Jesus that his friend Lazarus is ill. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, live in Bethany, a small hamlet near Jerusalem. They are very good friends, the four of them, apparently. There is an easy familiarity between Jesus and the two women.

Against the advice of his disciples, Jesus decides to go to Lazarus's side. But he waits several days. When he arrives, Lazarus is already dead. Both Mary and Martha express exasperation that he didn't arrive sooner. The mourners, friends of the family, also wonder what was keeping him. Everyone wants to know if stories of his miraculous powers were true, why Jesus didn't exercise some of that power on behalf of his dear friend, Lazarus.

And then, we are told, Jesus wept. Is there any other verse in the whole New Testament that so well attests to Jesus's humanness?

In his grief, his eyes still wet with tears, "greatly disturbed," Jesus orders the stone rolled away, even though practical Martha is fussing because of what the delay must mean, her brother being dead for four days.

Undeterred, Jesus shouts into the open grave, "Lazarus, come out of there!" After a pause heavy with emotion, the dead man comes out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth; his face wrapped. And Jesus says to them: "Unbind him and let him go."

Now this is a truly stirring moment. And if you listen to that command of his, those words, "unbind him and let him go," if you really have ears to hear them, you may understand that Jesus is speaking of Lazarus's winding sheet, but also those fetters that hold *us* captive too – including our fear of hoping for too much in this life.

There in Bethany, Jesus not only raises his beloved friend, Lazarus. He also calls