

ITS BEEN A HARD WEEK FOR OUR NATION AND FOR OUR COMMUNITY: 4
MOUNTIES SHOT IN THE LINE OF DUTY; A 24 YEAR OLD YOUNG MAN
DRAGGED 7 KILOMETERS TO HIS DEATH IN MAPLE RIDGE ALL OVER \$12.00
WORTH OF STOLEN GAS; THE CONVICTION OF A FATHER FOR MURDERING
HIS DAUGHTER – JUST BECAUSE SHE FELL IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE OF
ANOTHER CULTURE.

IN THE MIDST OF ALL OF THIS – SOME OF YOU HAVE FAMILY AND
FRIENDS WHO ARE DYING OR WHO HAVE DIED RECENTLY – ALL OF US
ARE FACING OUR OWN DEATH – SOME OF US ANTICIPATE ITS ARRIVAL
SOONER RATHER THAN LATER.

OF ALL THE AMAZING THINGS THAT WE AS HUMAN BEINGS HAVE BEEN
ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH THROUGHOUT HISTORY – WE HAVE STILL NOT
BEEN ABLE TO OVERCOME DEATH.

NO MATTER HOW MANY ANTI-WRINKLE CREAMS WE PUT ON OUR FACES –
OR VITAMINS WE TAKE OR EXERCISE REGIMES WE FOLLOW – WE CAN'T
STOP DEATH FROM COMING – AND CERTAINLY NONE OF THESE THINGS
WILL HELP US IN THE FACE OF A SPEEDING BULLET – OR A DETERMINED
VICIOUS ATTACKER – OR AN ARMY TANK LOADED WITH AMUNITION.

IN LIGHT OF THIS REALITY – TODAY’S SCRIPTURE READINGS SEEM ALMOST OFFENSIVE. IF I WAS THE PREGNANT WIFE OF A FALLEN RCMP OFFICER – I MIGHT READ TODAY’S STORY ABOUT LAZARUS AND WONDER WHY JESUS HADN’T BOTHERED TO SHOW UP AT ROSZCO’S FARM ON TIME TO SAVE THE DAY. IF I WAS THE MOTHER OF THE SLAIN AMANDEEP ATWAL I MIGHT WONDER WHEN EZEKIEL WAS PLANNING ON COMING TO DIG UP THE GRAVE OF MY DAUGHTER AND BRING HER BONES BACK TO LIFE.

THESE MAGICAL STORIES FROM SCRIPTURE SEEM LIKE LITTLE COMFORT WHEN WE KNOW JESUS DOES NOT LITERALLY BRING PEOPLE BACK FROM DEATH.

SO ON A DAY SUCH AS TODAY – AFTER A WEEK SUCH AS THE ONE WE HAVE JUST HAD -- WE EITHER HAVE TO IGNORE THESE STORIES – OR FIND A WAY TO SUSPEND OUR DISBELIEF – SO THAT WE CAN GET AT THE DEEPER MEANING TO WHICH THEY POINT.

MUCH HAS BEEN MADE OVER THE YEARS ABOUT THE EMOTION JESUS EXPRESSES WHEN HE FINALLY ARRIVES AT THE HOME OF LAZARUS ONLY TO FIND OUT LAZARUS IS NOW THREE DAYS IN THE GRAVE.

WE ARE TOLD THAT HE IS GREATLY DISTURBED --HE WEEPS -- AND THEN WHEN HE ARRIVES AT THE GRAVESITE -- HE IS GREATLY DISTURBED ONCE AGAIN.

FOR YEAR'S THIS HAS BEEN INTERPRETED AS A SIGN OF JESUS COMPASSION FOR HIS FRIEND LAZARUS AND FOR ALL WHO SUFFER. BUT MORE RECENTLY SCHOLARS HAVE BEEN INTERPRETING THIS DISTURBANCE OF JESUS -- NOT AS A SIGN OF HIS OWN GRIEF -- BUT RATHER AS A SIGN OF HIS ANGER AND INDIGNATION -- SPECIFICALLY HIS ANGER AT THE POWER OF DEATH -- AND THE GRIP THAT DEATH CAN HAVE ON US AS HUMAN BEINGS.

JESUS IS DISTURBED BECAUSE SO STRONG IS THE HOLD OF DEATH ON US THAT IT CAN TURN US AWAY FROM THE POWER OF LOVE AND MAKE US BECOME DEATH-EMBRACING PEOPLE.

SO FOR EXAMPLE WHEN SOMEONE TAKES ANOTHER'S LIFE -- THEY WILL OFTEN TAKE THEIR OWN LIFE AS WELL RATHER THAN FACE THE CONSEQUENCES HERE ON EARTH. OR WHEN SOMEONE TAKES ANOTHER'S LIFE -- WE REACT BY WANTING TO TAKE REVENGE ON THEM.

WE ONLY NEED REMIND OURSELVES THAT AFTER SEPTEMBER 11TH WHEN INNOCENT LIVES WERE TAKEN--

THE POWERS OF THE WORLD QUICKLY TURNED AROUND AND FACED THAT DEATH BY CREATING MORE DEATH.

EVEN WHEN WE ARE TALKING ABOUT LESS VIOLENT LIFE-DENYING SITUATIONS – THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE – OR THE DEATH OF A RELATIONSHIP – OR THE DEAD-END JOB IN WHICH WE FIND OURSELVES – OR THE DEATH OF OUR SELF-WORTH FOR ANY NUMBER OF REASONS -- THE DIMINISHMENT OF OUR CAPABILITIES DUE TO ILLNESS OR AGING – WHEN FACED WITH THESE SITUATIONS -- WE OFTEN HAVE A TENDENCY TO DWELL IN THAT PLACE OF DEATH – RATHER THAN LEANING TOWARDS LIFE.

WE DON'T WANT TO GO ON LIVING – WE CAN'T SEE OUR WAY OUT OF THE SITUATION SO WE STAY IN IT – WE ENGAGE SELF-DESTRUCTIVE HABITS AND BEHAVIOURS – WE BECOME BOUND AND TIED BY WHATEVER IT IS THAT HAS A HOLD ON US.

I FOUND IT INTERESTING TO DISCOVER THIS WEEK THAT PARLIAMENT IS ONCE AGAIN DEBATING THE WISDOM OF PUTTING WARNING LABELS ON ALCOHOL. ONE OF THE RATIONALES FOR NOT PUTTING THE LABELS ON IS THAT APPARENTLY EVERYONE ALREADY KNOWS THE DANGERS OF DRINKING.

THIS MADE ME THINK THAT YES WE DO ALL KNOW THOSE DANGERS – WE JUST DON'T WANT TO BE REMINDED THAT WE LIKE TO DO THINGS THAT ARE NOT GOOD FOR US. SOMETIMES WE'D RATHER JUST KEEP ON DWELLING IN DARKNESS RATHER THAN REACHING FOR THE LIGHT.

JOHN'S GOSPEL FROM WHICH WE READ THIS MORNING – IS ALL ABOUT URGING US TO LEAVE THE DARK AND DYING PLACES OF OUR LIVES IN ORDER TO EMBRACE LIFE – ITS ABOUT COMPELLING US TO BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF LIFE AND LOVE OVER DEATH – EVEN IN THE MOST HORRIBLE OF CIRCUMSTANCES – EVEN WHEN WE ARE SO TIGHTLY BOUND UP AND BURIED UNDER THOSE THINGS THAT HOLD US DOWN -- THAT BEING RELEASED FROM THEM SEEMS NEAR IMPOSSIBLE.

AND JOHN'S GOSPEL – AND THE PROPHET EZEKIEL ARE INTERESTED IN US EXPERIENCING THAT LIFE NOW -- TODAY – NOT ONLY IN THE SWEET HEREAFTER. AND SO IT IS THAT THEY PRESENT US WITH THESE VERY EARTH-BOUND STORIES OF BONES THAT KNIT TOGETHER AND COME TO LIFE AGAIN – AND STINKING DEAD LAZARUS WHO MIRACULOUSLY COMES WALKING OUT OF THE TOMB IN WHICH HE HAS LAID FOR MANY DAYS.

STORIES MEANT TO COAX US INTO BELIEVING IN THE POSSIBILITY THAT WE TOO CAN EXPERIENCE RESURRECTION FROM THE DRY AND BRITTLE AND DYING PLACES IN OUR LIVES – AND RELEASE FROM THE DEATH-EMBRACING WAYS OF OUR SOCIETY -- EVEN WHEN WE CAN'T SEE CLEARLY BEFORE US HOW THAT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE.

A FRIEND OF MINE ONCE TOLD ME THAT THE FIRST THING SHE DOES WHEN SOMEONE GIVES HER A BOOK TO READ IS FLIP TO THE LAST FEW PAGES. IF THE BOOK HAS A GOOD AND HAPPY ENDING SHE FIGURES SHE CAN STAND TO READ IT – BUT IF THE STORY ENDS IN TRAGEDY – SHE PUTS IT DOWN.

I WONDER IF THE WRITER OF JOHN'S GOSPEL DIDN'T HAVE A SIMILAR KIND OF PERSONALITY –IT SEEMS HE TOO WANTS US TO KNOW HOW HIS STORY ENDS SO WE CAN STAND TO LIVE THROUGH IT. AND SO HE PLACES THE STORY OF THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF LAZARUS RIGHT BEFORE THE STORY OF JESUS DEATH.

OUR READING OF IT TODAY COMBINED WITH THE READING ABOUT THE VALLEY OF THE DEAD BONES COMES RIGHT BEFORE WE TOO ARE INVITED TO TURN TOWARDS JERUSALEM TO FACE THE FINAL DAYS OF JESUS LIFE.

DAYS MARKED BY HUMANITY'S FAILURE TO LIVE BY THE WAYS OF LOVE
-DAYS MARKED BY OUR LACK OF COURAGE AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS A
SOCIETY- MARKED BY OUR LACK OF COMMITMENT TO THE ONE WHOM
WE FEEBLY FOLLOW - MARKED BY OUR ONGOING DENIAL AND
BETRAYAL OF WHAT WE KNOW IN OUR HEARTS TO BE THE WAY
TOWARDS LIFE - MARKED BY ALL THE WAYS THAT WE TOO SUFFER PAIN
AND INDIGNITY IN OUR OWN LIVES.

DAYS THANK GOD THAT ARE ULTIMATELY MARKED BY GOD'S GRACIOUS
LIFE-GIVING LOVE AND POWER TO SET US FREE FROM ALL THAT
ENTOMBS US.

THERE IS MUCH IN OUR LIVES AND MUCH IN OUR WORLD THAT AT TIMES
SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERCOME. AT TIMES IT SEEMS THAT DEATH HAS
A HOLD ON US FROM WHICH WE WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO ESCAPE: WE
SEE IT IN THE DYING OFF OF ENDANGERED SPECIES - WE SEE IT IN THE
DYING OFF OF THE OZONE LAYER - WE SEE IT IN INCREASED DRUG USE
AMONG OUR TEENS - AND INCREASED FEARS FOR OUR CHILDREN - WE
SEE IT IN THE PREVALENCE OF CANCER AND THE THOUSANDS PERISHING
FROM HIV/AIDS - WE SEE IT IN OUR WESTERN CULTURE THAT SO OFTEN
SEEMS SICK WITH SELF-OBSESSION - WE SEE IT IN OUR OWN PERSONAL
HURTS AND WOUNDS AND GRIEFS WHICH SOMEDAYS FEEL LIKE THEY
WILL OVERTAKE US.

SOMETIMES IT IS HARD TO BE ABLE TO SEE WHERE GOD IS UNBINDING
THE BOUNDS OF DEATH – BREATHING LIFE INTO THE DARKENED TOMBS
OF OUR EXISTENCES

BUT OUR FAITH CALLS US TO BELIEVE IN NEW LIFE – IN RESURRECTION –
DESPITE ALL OF THAT – AND NOT IN SOME FAR AND DISTANT PLACE – BUT
IN THE HERE AND NOW.

PERHAPS THIS IS THE REAL MIRACLE IN THE STORY OF LAZARUS – NOT
THAT HE IS RAISED FROM THE DEAD – BUT THAT MARY AND MARTHA
BELIEVE THAT DEATH WILL NOT HAVE THE FINAL SAY. PERHAPS THIS IS
THE REAL MIRACLE IN THE STORY OF EZEKIEL AND THE DRY BONES –
THAT EZEKIEL BELIEVED IN WHAT GOD WAS SAYING TO HIM ENOUGH TO
ACTUALLY SPEAK TO THOSE DRY BONES.

OUR FAITH CALLS US TO BELIEVE THAT GOD – THROUGH THE SPIRIT OF
CHRIST – IS ENTERING OUR DARK AND DYING PLACES WORKING
MIRACLES OF HOPE –EVEN AS WE SPEAK – JUST AS SURELY AS THE
CHERRY BLOSSOMS ARE SPRINGING TO LIFE ON OUR TREES.

AND IT IS CRITICAL FOR US TO BELIEVE THIS TRUTH – EVEN WHEN WE
CAN'T SEE ITS IMMEDIATE PRESENCE – PERHAPS ESPECIALLY WHEN WE
CAN'T SEE ITS IMMEDIATE PRESENCE. IT IS CRITICAL FOR US NOT TO

WAIT FOR THE END OF TIME FOR THAT TRUTH – BUT TO LOOK FOR IT AND TO BELIEVE IN ITS AVAILABILITY TO US IN THE PRESENT.

ACCORDING TO JOHN'S GOSPEL AFTER JESUS RAISED LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD – SOME OF THOSE WHO SAW THE DEED WENT TO THE PHARISEES TO TELL THEM WHAT JESUS HAD DONE – SO THEY CALLED A MEETING WITH THE CHIEF PRIESTS – AND FROM THAT DAY ON THEY PLANNED TO PUT JESUS TO DEATH.

THAT'S THE PARADOX OF THE CHRISTIAN STORY – JESUS GIVES LIFE – AND IT LEADS TO HIS DEATH. WE WHO KNOW HOW THE STORY ENDS ARE INVITED NOW TO WALK WITH HIM TO THAT DEATH – AS WE DO SO MAY WE ABANDON AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS ALL OF OUR OWN LIFE-DENYING FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOURS – SO THAT WE TOO MAY ABANDON OUR GRAVECLOTHES AND BE SURPRISED BY LIFE.