

Hebrew Testament Reading *Ezekiel 37:1-14*
New Testament Reading *John 11:17-44*

word count: 2,407

How many of you can remember being a child and discussing belief with a friend your own age? We are taught that belief is central to our lives. As kids, we have all had discussions about how belief works.

Around the time I was eight or nine, my friend Herbert and I got to talking about how it would be really great to play the violin. The violin was THE most beautiful but difficult instrument to learn to play. Therefore, we wanted to play the violin. But we did not want to practice. His sister knew of a girl who practiced so hard that she got permanent dents in her fingers from the strings, and her head would never be straight again, and she would always walk around like this (neck hunched to the left) for the rest of her life—all from excessive violin practice.

There had to be an easier way. We were taught about belief; it was the strongest power in the world. We learned about belief in church; belief that filled everyone who had it with strength. Belief was at the core of all human capability. And of course, if you really believed in yourself, you could do anything. Therefore, if we really, really believed that we could play the violin, all we had to do was pray about it for a long time, then lift the violin and the bow in place, and, sending every ounce of belief into our hands, the bow would strike across the violin and beautiful music would pore out with no effort, and all we would have to do is just stand there and let it possess us, just because we believed. We were on our way to becoming famous violinists. Does anyone have a similar story?

Anyone who has ever seen “Peter Pan” as a child knows of what I am speaking. I think Mary Martin may have caused more small concussions in children than any other actress. After the conclusion of “Peter Pan,” how many of you went out onto a high spot on the lawn, or stood on the sofa, and said, “I believe I can fly,” and then found out you couldn’t?

Some fifteen years ago, this childish idea of shortchanging the process of working at belief through learning, questioning and discernment came back to me when I decided that it was ridiculous that I cannot cook. Of course I would be able to cook, if I only believed I could. If I saw myself as a cook, I would be one. It was wrong of me not to contribute to the cuisine in our household. Not only was it wrong, but I would put an end to it right away.

There used to be a French restaurant in Big Bear that served a meal called Veal Normande. I asked the server how it was made, and she told me that they first tenderized the meat, and that a simple white sauce was poured over the sautéed apples and veal. I listened to this description as if it was an instruction manual on French cooking, and memorized what she told me.

Of course I could cook. Not only could I cook, but also for my first attempt, I would surprise Carl with Veal Normande, and then it would come out that I was a good cook after all. None of this *learning* stuff for me. Anyone could churn out a hamburger. I was, after all, a *creative* person, and therefore I could cook without consulting a cookbook. I scoffed at my unfamiliarity with the appliances in the kitchen and would now make myself into a prize chef in one brief evening. Why? Because I *believed*, and we are taught that simple and pure belief is all we need.

I assembled everything on the counter, reflecting that after tonight, I was committing myself to sharing in the cooking from now on, because after years of hiding my culinary light under a bushel, gifts like mine for cooking would be called upon time and time again.

Carl was banished to the living room because the last time he watched me try to cook, he became concerned, and I got nervous and ruined a pan.

It was time to tenderize the veal. I got out a hammer and whacked it a few times and put it into a pan with some apples. Carl called in to ask if I was all right.

A white sauce was next. Now, what is in a sauce, especially one that is white? I got out some flour and butter and put them together, but they were not sauce-like. So, I put in some white wine, but now it was watery, so I kept stirring and adding more and more flour.

I set the table, and put out some good bread and a salad. When everything seemed sufficiently cooked, I put the white sauce over the apples and the veal, put it on the table, and told Carl to come to dinner.

We each ate a mouthful.

If you took Playdoh, made it the consistency of library paste, then slathered it over some kind of mystery meat, you would have my Veal Normande. After chewing on it for a while, Carl said, “Oh! Well... This is good!”

Belief is what keeps us moving—it gives us hope and allows us to take part in life beyond the boundaries of what we may think is possible. Searching for meaning and finding belief in something beyond us is what keeps us going and a part of a spiritual life. Belief also needs to be worked on, nurtured, grown and strengthened so that a well-tested faith accompanies us along our own paths to maturity. It is with us in whatever state into which we have allowed it to grow or lapse. But, as each of us learns through whatever lessons life hands us, it cannot be suddenly co-opted without the necessary work on our own part to help us to achieve that which we believe possible.

Today’s readings contain metaphors that remind us that the Spirit has always been alive within us, from birth to death. In fact, the Hebrew word, “ruah” means both breath and spirit.

The Gospel of John is a very strange document—it contains long stories about Jesus where he says things that are not found in any other sources. It presents a Jesus with a very different persona than the one we see in the synoptic gospels. The story of Lazarus appears to be written to prefigure the resurrection story that is coming, and is in fact a resurrection story that is hard for everyone involved to believe.

Ezekiel prophesies the vision that there is a Spirit that surrounds us, the primordial creative energy swirling about all of life, breathing its new life into dry bones. Dry bones in a valley, filled with spirit and engaged in the cosmic dance between the world, and the connection that we see only through a glass darkly; the “infinity” into which soul returns to take part. It is in fact the first “resurrection story” in the Bible.

A mature system of belief, carefully nurtured and grown, makes this cosmic dance seem so natural; participating without fear, and perhaps even believing that it is all for a reason that may or may not be made clear to us. But it really doesn’t matter—we are a part of the dance, we believe that we are a part of it, there is life in us now, and life in us in the Spirit. Ezekiel says, “Only you know, God. It is entirely up to you.”

I read recently that the majority of people who go to church on Sunday do not really believe in the Christian story, but remain quiet about where they are in their beliefs. The article said that in interviews, people stated that they got great comfort in going to church and being in the company of others who had faith. It went on to say that a great number of these people go to theologically conservative churches because the belief of those around them is more palpable, even though they themselves may not believe. They sense that in the stories of resurrection, there is a sense of hope, a promise that no matter how bad things seem right now, the phoenix can rise from the ashes—Easter can happen to people who sense that they live in a Good Friday world.

I’m not going to open up that discussion here publicly by asking for a show of hands, but you know whether or not you fit this profile. If it is, you are in good company.

“I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live,” says God in this passage.

In this room there are people who have felt something we call “Spirit” move them.

There are people here in the field of medicine whose skills have worked in moments when it seems clear that something more than your own gifts have assisted in healing, while at other times you have been caught up in the great mystery of life passing into death; moving from one plane to another.

Some here are parents who have experienced the wonder of the universe in the act of birth, and have explored the meaning of the soul through watching a new being who is a part of you and yet has come with a personality and an agenda not of your making.

There are teachers here who have watched some of the same “aha!” moments through the eyes of the very young, and caregivers here who have watched similar moments of awakening and understanding through the experiences of the elderly.

How many here are musicians, writers, actors or artists, who, having worked at your craft, have felt those transcendent moments when you are caught up in the act of creativity and have found it to have a life all it’s own, in which you are merely participating?

What is it to which you can stand up and boldly say, “I believe”?

Because, we do not have to wait like Mary and Martha for a resurrection. We don’t have to wait for Easter to come to know this—we are faced with Good Friday’s every day.

Tony Campolo tells the story of a black Baptist preacher in the inner city of Philadelphia who preached a sermon Tony says he will never forget. Tony preached first, and thought he was fantastic. He sat down and said to his pastor, “Now see if you can top that one!”

“Son,” said the black pastor, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” For an hour and a half the pastor repeated these words over and over again: “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s a comin’.”

“I’ve never heard anything like it,” Tony said. “He just kept saying it. The congregation was spellbound by the power of it.”

“It’s Friday. Mary, Jesus’ mother is crying her eyes out. That’s her son up there on the cross. He’s dying the agonizing death of crucifixion as a criminal. But it’s only Friday,” the preacher said. “Sunday’s a comin’.”

“The apostles were really down and out. Jesus, their leader, was being killed by evil men. But it was only Friday. Sunday is a comin’.”

“He went on like that for 30 minutes, 40 minutes, an hour. Each time he said, ‘It’s Friday,’ the crowd began to respond, ‘but Sunday’s comin’’. An hour and 15 minutes.

“It’s Friday and evil has triumphed over good. Jesus is dying up there on the cross. The world is turned upside down. This shouldn’t happen. But it’s only Friday. Sunday’s a comin’.”

“It’s Friday. But Sunday is comin’’. Mary Magdalene was out of her mind with grief. Jesus was being killed. Jesus had turned her life from sin to grace. Now he was dead. But it’s only Friday. Sunday is a comin’.’”

The place was rocking. For an hour and a half. “Friday! But Sunday is a comin’’. Friday. But Sunday is a comin’.’

“I was exhausted,” Tony said. “It was the best sermon I’ve ever heard. The old preacher was saying it and the people were with him. ‘It’s Friday, but Sunday is a comin’’. It was powerful,” Tony said. “It was personal.”¹

Whether it’s a story of dry bones that come alive with sinews and breath and spirit, or Lazarus raised and walking out of the tomb, or the story of Easter that is almost upon us, for me, and perhaps for you, this is personal too in the message we hear and with what ears we hear it.

It’s Friday. Someone close to you is no longer around. But Sunday’s comin’.

It’s Friday. The country is a mess. There’s war, a bad economy, bad politics, bad leadership. But Sunday’s comin’.

It’s Friday. You don’t have a job. But Sunday’s comin’.

It’s Friday. Money is tight. You’re in a funk. There’s a deep grief or uneasiness or dissatisfaction that won’t go away. But Sunday’s comin’.

It’s Friday. There are health issues. Relationship issues. Loneliness issues. Housing issues. But Sunday’s comin’’. There is a resurrection after every Good Friday life hands you. A stepping forward out of the long darkness.

It's about belief; that belief that is there somewhere deep inside you. Not the magical kind, the simple kind, not the black-and-white kind; the kind that is called upon without maturity, wisdom, even skepticism—no one will ever learn to play the violin that way.

And not the kind that you stick there because you think that you SHOULD have belief, either. This belief is the kind that comes out when you are face to face with that transcendent moment, the sharing of that deep sadness, the ability to reach down deep inside and know that you are there—there actually is a “there” there, and that you are connected with all that is and that nothing, not cynicism, not our sophistication, not even reasonable doubts can take it away. Like Martha and Mary, it is waiting to come forth, like Ezekiel's vision, it allows us to be aware of the breath of life that fills us and gives us strength for the journey.

It is yours and mine. Step out of whatever tomb encases you and claim it. Let it fill you, fall upon you, make you aware that you are fully human and wholly alive in it. AMEN.

Sermon Resource

1. Tony Campolo, loosely quoted by Ronald J. Lavin in, “I Am the Resurrection and the Life.”

Scripture Readings for Sunday, March 9, 2008 Lent 5C

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

John 11:17-44

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

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."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."

Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.