

BREAKING THROUGH
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

Fifth Sunday in Lent (A)
March 13, 2005 Adelphi

Once in a while, we see a television ad that really inspires us and that makes us really ponder about (buying) the product. Or at least, we become interested in finding out more about what they are selling. I have seen this interesting ad on TV lately.

The music starts as the ad begins. People are walking yet they are not moving anywhere. Their legs are moving but they keep moving on the same spot. Cars are running too. The wheels are turning, yet the cars remain on the same spot. Then a voice comes out, "It has been a long time since transportation truly advanced..." Do you remember what this ad is about? (Prius – a hybrid car claiming to have high mileage)

The ad claims that Prius is the best thing that happens on planet earth. The ad ends with these words on the screen, "Moving Forward." Prius is a technological breakthrough that moves the history of transportation forward. Breaking through. Moving forward. It all means something that is new. Technology is breaking through every day, moving the history forward.

The imageries of "breaking through" and "moving forward" are something that I have been thinking about lately. Breaking through the old life and moving forward to a new life.

I know the spring is in the air. I can feel it all over my face. When I go outside, my eyes are itchy. My nose is itchy. So, I look up to the trees, there are millions of buds that are pouring out pollens. I hate pollens. Yet, I see such a force of new life springing out of the bare tree trunks. Millions of buds mean a gushing force of new life. It is exciting! The spring is here. It is exciting because there is new life in the air.

Isn't it true that sometimes we may feel like the bare tree trunks and we want to find some new life? New life in our job. New life in our family. New life in our marriage. New life in our church. Life that excites us. Life that makes us feel it is worth living.

Where do we find that new life?

When Jesus first heard that Lazarus was sick, he did not show any anxiety over his sickness even though he loved Lazarus very much. He took his time to stay in the place where he was staying. He stuck to his pre-arranged schedule. He obviously did not want to be pushed or rushed to yield to the request.

In the meantime, Lazarus died.

When it was time for Jesus to go to the next stop of his journey, he had a long conversation with his disciples. The disciples were confused about what Jesus had in mind about Lazarus, about his ministry. Finally, Jesus came to the village where Lazarus and his two sisters lived.

Jesus again had a long conversation with Lazarus' sister, Martha about death and resurrection. Then, the other sister, Mary came to see Jesus and they had another conversation again.

It is almost like watching a movie. Some people just care about what happens. What happens to the characters? What happens at the end of the story?

The interesting thing about movie, or about life, or even about our faith, is not what happens at the end. It is not about what happens at the end of our journey. It is not about what happens when we die.

Every scene in the movie, every moment of our life, every step of our faith journey counts. It is a process. It is the journey that matters. The end does not come out of nothing. The journey itself is what leads to the end.

After Jesus engaged in these long conversations with different people, he finally came to the point where he wanted to talk about Lazarus. How did he die? Where was he laid? When he asked people to roll away the stone in front of Lazarus' tomb, Martha said, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." People rolled away the stone, Jesus called out his name and Lazarus came out.

The strange thing was up to this point it was quite an emotional event. People worried about Lazarus. People wept for him. People were anxious over Jesus' seemingly non-anxious presence. There was a lot of emotion going on.

But when Lazarus came out of the tomb, when the dead man started to walk, it was a rather emotion-less moment. People may have been shocked. People may have been scared by the dead man walking. There was no sound of joyful praise. We did not hear any voice of joy, the joy of new life, the joy of reunion.

The only description we got was some people believed in Jesus. Yet, some people went to the Pharisees and the high priests. An emergency council meeting was held and the plot was planned to kill Jesus.

Isn't it strange? A joyful event led to a horrific event where Jesus would be arrested, sentenced to death, and crucified on the cross. A reunion of a family led to the breaking up of a teacher and the disciples he lived with for three years. A new life led to the end of another life. Life became death. Isn't it a strange story?

The story of Lazarus is not only about resurrection from death. The story of Lazarus is about the power of God who gives life. Only God can give new life. We can only find new life in God. New life is exciting and only God can give us such exciting new life.

Yet, this God given new life can be pretty threatening because when new life comes, it changes our relationships. New life changes the way we are used to be. New life sometimes shatters our old world. New life alters the way we think and act. If we are not

ready, we will be scared and we will resist what God is doing in our lives to an extent like those who wanted Jesus to be crucified because he brought new life to them.

Last week's Dateline featured the story of a beautiful Czech model named Petra. She and her husband were vacationing in Thailand when the tsunami came. Her husband was swept away by water and 3 three months later found dead about one mile from the villa they were staying. Petra survived.

Her story was so dramatic. She was swept away by the violent water. She floated up and down with the water. Finally, she caught the leaves of a palm tree. She hung in there for nearly 8 hours before she was rescued. The violent water hit and smashed her pelvis. Her pelvis was broken into thousands of pieces. She was bleeding internally, about half of the blood in her body was lost. The doctor had no idea how she survived such a violent event.

Petra saw children and people floating by, screaming. About half an hour later, everything became quiet. She kept hanging on to the tree. The sun was scorching her. In the midst of death and horror, for the very first time, as an atheist, she prayed. She prayed for those people. She prayed for her husband. She prayed. She said she felt that there was something larger than she. She said she felt she was so tiny and she could only accept what was happening. Yet, she felt a sense of peace.

We live in something larger than ourselves. Truly, what we can control about our life is only a very tiny portion. To break through, to move forward, we need God.

When Ezekiel saw the valley of dry bones, very dry bones, he was in something much larger than what he could understand. When God asked him, "Can these bones live?" His answer was quite humble, "God, you know."

Sometimes, some forces in our lives are like these dry bones. They make our life seem very dry, very depressed, very hopeless. Day in and day out, the force that keeps these bones from living a full life also keeps us from living a full life intended by God.

God is the only one who can breaks us from whatever that is holding us back. Connecting with God, listening to God, dwelling in God is what makes us live a full life. If those branches do not grow on the tree trunk, they will not be able to bear any new buds.

God not only gives new life to individuals. God also gives new life to a country, like South Africa. God also gives new life to a group of people. God gives new life to God's church. God can empower the church to be a force in the world that brings newness to the society. Yet, new life can be threatening because it brings changes. So, let us prepare ourselves to welcome this new life in our midst.