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What does it mean to be called out from your place of death?

What is it like to be in that place where you think to yourself, “This is where I am going to die?”

Maybe some of you know. We hear stories every day it seems of shooting, at schools or camps, where people hide in closets or under desks and think to themselves, “This is where I am going to die.” We hear of people trapped in cars, people caught in elevators, people pulled underwater in freak boating accidents. Some of you have been in accidents like this. If you are lucky, you survive and live to tell the heroic tale of the day you almost died.

Most people fear dying and being buried. It's really the only thing humans hold in common, when you think about it—we all one day will die. And, as depressing as this topic might seem, we are in Lent, after all, and this is the church's time to intentionally take a good, deep look at mortality and death. Thankfully, though, we are nearing the end of Lent, because no matter how necessary it might be, it is a taxing and exhausting exercise, if, in fact, you do it right.

It's precisely because we are in Lent that we have these profound texts today...first we get that mind-blowing reading from Ezekiel about the valley of dry bones, and then we get that famous story of Lazarus being called back to life from his tomb. We know these stories so well, don't we? And rightfully so. These stories are among those Super-Stories from the Bible that show off God's creative power in miraculous ways. If we made a list of God's Top Five Greatest Hits, these two would be among them. There would of course also be the creation story itself, the flood and then the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ezekiel's valley of bones and the resurrected Lazarus hold two things in common—1. they are both dead, really, truly and completely dead, and 2. neither are supposed to be dead. The bones in Ezekiel's valley are the remains of a murdered people, victims of genocide. Lazarus dies in the prime of his life, we don't know why really. He gets really sick and dies, leaving a whole community, including two sisters, deep in grief. He is young, leaving no wife nor children behind...he is too young to die. In both cases, though, whether dead by violence or disease, by mass murder or premature death, the dry bones and Lazarus are dead and buried.

And yet God calls them back to life, showing to the entire cosmos that he has the power to restore the dead to life. And this conquers our fear of death, this is the long-awaited Easter joy!

So why don't we seem particularly joyful? Why do we mope and complain like we do?

Granted, it's a few weeks too soon for the Easter proclamation, but it's coming inevitably...it's not like we don't know how the Easter story ends! We know that Jesus is raised from the dead, thus crushing our fear of dying and being buried in the cold, damp ground. So we should be joyful.

Well, maybe we aren't particularly joyful because *maybe* death and burial are not our worst fear, after all.

Maybe we can well imagine something worse than dying and being buried in the ground.

Yes, I think we can imagine something worse than death and burial, something we live in every day.

And there's only one thing worse than that—and that is the fear of being buried alive.

And I don't necessarily mean that literally, like they did in ancient Carthage to their unwanted children or in China to their undesired girls...I mean this figuratively...to be buried alive is a fate far worse than death. Yet this is a daily reality for most people. To be buried—while still alive—by fear and anxiety and depression and despair...to be buried alive by financial debt, by suffocating relationships, by crushing self-hatred and insecurity...to be buried alive by sorrow and grief and hopelessness...and the list could presumably go on and on and on.

As we Iowans prepare for the stormy spring and the inevitable tornado watches and warnings, I

think of footage from Parkersburg or any town leveled by a tornado for that matter, and I think of people clamoring and clawing from their cellars, pushing with all their strength to get out from underneath, to push away from the dark grave and towards the sun and fresh air...be dead and buried beneath the rubble is sad enough, but to survive and be buried alive under the rubble is a thousand times worth...and so we push with our legs as if our lives depend on it, and indeed they do. We fight and claw desperately against the forces that seek to crush our spirits and bury us alive.

So, then, the ultimate question remains...if God's creation and redemptive words can reassemble the dry bones in Ezekiel's valley, and if God's creative and redemptive word can breath life again into Lazarus' dead lungs, can God not even outdo himself by rescuing those who are buried alive?

The answer is, of course, yes.

God chooses bring the dead back to life. But God also chooses to stir to life those of us who are still alive, who feel buried by the weight of life.

But sometimes his voice is hard to hear, because there is so much noise in life—the roar of the tornado, the sound of metal twisting, brakes screeching, washing machines spinning, trains whistling, jets roaring, children crying, women screaming, men shouting, TV's shrieking, stereos thumping, eggs frying...can we really hear God's voice calling to us? Because it *is* there...

...calling out not only to those under the ground whose hearts have stopped and whose hands are still and whose flesh is cold, but also to those of us yet above the ground, those of us who are still buried but still very much alive, whose pulse is strong, whose hands still toil, whose hearts still beat, whose lungs still breathe...

...just as God reaches into the valley of bones and just as God reaches into the tomb of Lazarus, so, too, does God reach out to you who are not yet in the grave...because whether you are dead and buried or buried alive, God has a one word for you—and that word is, of course, life.

Good news for the dead. Good news for the living. And good news for those generations yet unborn.