

Welcome back to our Lenten journey to the cross and beyond. This is a journey for all of God's people. As we have continued on our trip, we have found that our traveling companions, God's people, include a wide assortment of people: the tempted, spectators, outsiders, blind, and today we welcome to our group the doubters. All these types, in fact all people, are welcomed and encouraged to join us.

The Army always had a different way of looking at things, different than most anyone else's perspective. While some say that there is no sense in beating a dead horse, the Army often thought that there was no horse too dead to beat. Today's readings seem to echo this different perspective: No bones are too dead for God to rattle, to fill with life. Lazarus wasn't too dead for God to bring back to life.

Yet if I asked for a show of hands, I wonder what your responses would be to:

Did God really bring a valley of bones alive or is this just an allegory?

Was Lazarus really dead, or a parable disguised as narrative?

Some might even skeptically ask whether I really expected them to believe such unbelievable stories.

Doubt; belief.

My generation started, or at least perfected, the concept of 'question authority'. We knew beyond a shadow of doubt that those in charge were not as smart, not as benevolent, not as pure in heart as we were. We were taught, more accurately we taught ourselves, to doubt, to question, everyone in authority; we did not trust anybody or anything. First we doubted those who were running the country from the president to the police. Then we refused to trust anyone over the age of 40, or 30, or Well, at least we have started trusting older people again, if only because we ourselves have aged.

Mistrust and doubt have a close cousin, conspiracy. The current reincarnation of the hippies' doubt is alive and well in talk show conspiracy theory. For most anything

that you observe, that you accept at face value, someone will counter that it just isn't so. Instead, there is a conspiracy that better explains what you think you see. I remember being told that all the contrails above Salt Lake City were not just normal air traffic. Even though we sit at the intersection of many busy historical air routes, what was really leaving those trails in the sky were Air Force planes dumping toxic chemicals, chemicals too dangerous to destroy by any other method. No amount of logic or evidence would counter this belief in a conspiracy.

Doubt, conspiracy, belief.

Is there reason to doubt, to be skeptical, to think about possible conspiracies? Unfortunately, there probably are some good reasons to look at this modern world with a healthy level of doubt and skepticism. We have been lied to by government officials, we have heard half-truths and misleading justifications from business leaders, we have seen hypocritical religious leaders self destruct before our eyes, numerous conspiracies have been exposed. We have learned that truth is a rare and precious commodity in this modern world of ours. We find it increasingly hard to believe anyone or anything.

Dry bones, Smelly Lazarus; God and Jesus.

We think we have learned that if it is too good to be true, it isn't. If we can not imagine it, it can't happen. So in a sense, each of us determines truth on the basis of what we are willing to believe. For some, the lunar landings were too much to believe, so they must have been the result of Hollywood special effects. For some, the Holocaust is too inhumane, too bizarre to have happened, so it must be nothing more than a conspiracy theory. Truth becomes very tenuous when each of us, each with different criteria, determines what we think is true.

But, is that how we are to approach these Bible stories this morning? It is easy to decide that God never really intended them to be taken literally. Or, they were greatly embellished before they were written. Perhaps there is a perfectly plausible conspiracy

theory that explains what really happened.

Incredible stories, meet generations of doubters.

You know, we are not alone with our doubts. Even Mary and Martha had their doubts. Sure, they believed that Jesus could have kept their brother alive, if Jesus had been there. Sure, someday there will some form of resurrection and then their brother will live again. Sure, God has power, up to a point. But that point seems to have passed for them when Lazarus died. God now appears powerless until that final day of resurrection. They doubted that Jesus could do anything now.

Yet, in spite of their doubts, they still trusted Jesus, trusted that he would do the right thing. Mary and Martha believed not only what Jesus told them, but believed in Jesus himself; Jesus, son of God, Word made flesh, the truth.

Before Jesus even got as far as Bethany, we encounter the doubts of Thomas. He trusted Jesus as a leader, as a teacher. Thomas was sure that this trip to a suburb of Jerusalem was sure death for both Jesus and his inner band of followers. Yet, Thomas knew that there was something going on here, something worth dying for. So Thomas, the one we often call Doubting Thomas, doubted aspects of Jesus, doubted the power of God in human form. Yet, in spite of his doubts, he was ready to follow Jesus to his death.

Doubts, trust, following Jesus.

And so it was, that Jesus called for Lazarus to come out of the grave. Jesus spoke, the Word of God made flesh, spoke. He called upon Lazarus to come out of the grave, to live again, right now, not some indeterminate future resurrection date. The word triumphed over death and doubt: Jesus spoke and Lazarus came out alive. The Word is life, the Word gives life.

In that arid valley of dry bones, God told Ezekiel what to do, what to say. Before those bones were brought to life, Ezekiel was told to prophesy to those bones, to tell

them to hear the word of the Lord. As Ezekiel spoke the word of God to those bones, the bones came together. Only when God told him to further prophesy that God would give them breath did they live again. The word of God is life, gives life.

God further told Ezekiel that this new life was a sign for Israel, a sign that there is reason to hope and trust in the Lord. God promised to put God's spirit in the people, give them new life so that they would know that he is the Lord. The doubters and those who had strayed away would again know that the word of the Lord is life itself.

Jesus told Martha and Mary that he brought Lazarus back to life so that they would see the glory of God; so that they might see and believe that God had sent him, that God's word is indeed life itself. The doubters would know that the word of God triumphs over death.

It seems that most of the miracles of Jesus were done so that we might believe, believe in the life giving power of the word. Whether it was life nourishing bread on a mountain side or the bread of life at the Last Supper, Jesus gives us life. When demons were cast out and illnesses healed, it was so that people could fully live. When sin was confronted and temptations overcome, it was so that people could see how to live in a right relationship with God. The miracles were so that people, doubters, would know the power of God, of a God unlimited by our narrow human perspectives.

God's people doubt. Mary and Martha and Thomas doubted. God's people have always had doubts, probably always will. Thomas and Mary and Martha doubted the extent of God's power. When we look within ourselves, I am sure that we all have doubted God's power at some point in our lives. But notice what the reaction of Jesus is to this doubt. Jesus did not confront the doubters, question their motivation, mock them nor cast aspersions upon their faith because of their doubts. Jesus did not drive them away or leave them wallowing in doubt. Jesus instead offered them the opportunity to believe, offered them a reason to believe that the Word does give life, is life.

Jesus still offers us that same opportunity to believe. As we approach Resurrection Sunday, the day that Jesus himself was raised from the dead, we are challenged to believe, to trust, that God is in fact God. That the Word of God is life, provides life, leads us to a life centered upon a living relationship with a loving God. Jesus still offers us, modern doubters, the opportunity to believe that God can do things that are beyond our imagination, beyond our limiting view of the world.

Do you doubt? Doubt the story of the dry bones and of Lazarus? Doubt the power of God? Do you want to change the Biblical story, transform it into a mere allegory, so that it is easier for you to believe? Even if it means believing in a very limited, constrained, and powerless God? Perhaps a question to ask yourself on this Lenten journey is this: “What within me needs to change so that I do believe?” “What within me needs to change so that I do believe Scripture? So that I do believe in Jesus, the Word of God?” God's word promises us life, a transformed life. This Lent, let us open ourselves to being transformed by God's word, to have the doubts removed, that we might see God's glory and believe God's truth.

Lord, open our hearts that we might be transformed. Help us to move beyond our doubts, our questions, our limitations and discover you this Lent. For you are life; you offer us life itself. Amen.