

“Watching for the Morning”  
Ezekiel 37: 1-14, Psalm 130, John 11: 1-45  
March 9, 2008  
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It's 4 A.M., and whatever you are worrying about seems much worse simply because of the hour. You can't sleep; you've probably been awake for at least a couple of hours by now. Some have referred to this time in which folks sometimes lie awake between the hours of nightfall and dawn as “the hour of the wolf,” when worries, fears and anxieties take hold, and restless tossing and turning commence. Who has not had such a time, and felt a deep, deep longing for the light of dawn? This is the longing that the writer of Psalm 130 spoke of when he wrote:

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.*

The soul longs for God, just as the sleepless worrier at 4 A.M. longs for the first sliver of reassuring sunlight to appear in the sky, just as the homesick child on her first sleepover watches the window in the strange room for the familiar light of day, just as the military guard watches for dawn and is relieved of the responsibility of remaining alert and awake all through the night. God's presence, when felt, is like the comforting arrival of dawn.

Dana had been a chaplain for hospice for years. She was well known and well loved by many in the area in which she lived because she had been part of a hospice team that had taken such wonderful care of so many through their journeys at end of life. She was only forty-something when a puzzling infection took hold of her, and she ended up herself as a patient in the hospital. A positive, caring, deeply spiritual person, a Catholic lay person, as it happened, despite the fact that her illness stumped her caregivers and her hospital stay was long, she greeted her many visitors with warmth, a gentle smile, and a calm demeanor. The more the people around Dana fretted, the more equanimity she seemed to muster. Her room filled with cards wishing her well, a fairly constant stream of visitors, and lots and lots of flowers. Though her illness progressed, her spirits seemed to remain good. There was a peace about her.

When God asked the prophet Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel's answer was not only full of humility, it summed up the whole of the human experience of unknowing before the mystery of God. The prophet replied, “O Lord God, you know.” The Lord then commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, which came together and were covered in sinew and flesh, but as yet had no breath in them. Ezekiel was then commanded to speak another prophetic oracle to the breath contained within the four winds; breath then came into the newly reconstituted bodies, and a vast multitude of the fallen people of Israel were restored to life. Ezekiel, scholars tell us, was one of the prominent citizens of Jerusalem, taken away as a captive to the Babylonian empire in the year 587 BC. It is hard for us today to grasp the devastating nature of the Babylonian exile of the people Israel; the people had lost their land; the temple was in ruins; their king was a captive. Many wondered if this marked the end of their walk with God; many wondered if morning would ever come again. Ezekiel's vision was God's resurrection answer to that question.

As time went on during Dana's hospital stay, she became more and more ill. When she slipped into unconsciousness and stayed there, it surprised her visitors. Only her immediate family members and her doctors had been aware of just how sick she was. She always seemed so calm and in such good spirits, it naturally led everyone to feel that recovery was just around the corner. Folks began to just go and sit in her room by her bed. It was very peaceful in there. Soft music was usually playing and the proliferation of flowers made it seem like a blooming park in the springtime. Despite many ardent medical efforts, Dana did not seem to be coming around.

The most amazing feature of the Lazarus story for me is the account of Jesus' deep distress and weeping. The Gospel of John presents the account of the raising of Lazarus as what we might call a "sign" story, in which a great act of God takes place in order to show forth the depth and breadth of God's loving presence concentrated in the person of Jesus. The Jesus of John's Gospel is one who is in control of his own destiny, and who is portrayed as seeing the big picture—seeing the over-arching purpose of his earthly mission, if you will, very, very clearly. He often seems commanding and calm, and very much in charge. How very touching it is, then, that we learn that Jesus is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" as he stands outside the tomb of his good friend Lazarus with the dead man's sister, his friend Mary, and sees her and the other mourners weeping. Jesus is so moved, he also begins to weep. As he walks to the tomb to raise Lazarus, again we are told that he is greatly disturbed. Here is our Christ weeping with us about the necessity of our mortality, the pains that our losses give us, his love for all of us shown forth in sacred tears.

What he does next, he does to show us that even in the face of death and loss and the devastating realities of life, it really, truly DOES make sense to keep watch for the morning. He raises Lazarus.

Bodily resurrection did not come for beloved Dana, the ailing chaplain. To the shock of the community that loved her, she died and was vigorously mourned by those who knew her. During the course of her illness, Dana had told her friend and co-worker Leslie that if she did not survive, she would try to find a way to communicate with her. As a hospice chaplain, Dana was, of course, a consummate believer in the afterlife. She had told her friend Leslie to watch for the appearance of a white feather; this would be the sign she would try to utilize to let her friend know that she was OK.

The stories of Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones and of the raising of Lazarus do cause us to wonder why everyone doesn't get a public bodily resurrection. To this question, we can only paraphrase Ezekiel, and answer that only God knows. Yet what these narratives make clear for all of us is that the source of life and of meaning is our God, who loves us so much that our suffering causes even him to weep and to act on our behalf. Ezekiel's wild vision and Lazarus' improbable raising are parts of **our** story and **our** history that assure us that no matter how dire our collective or individual situations may be, the power of God's love and grace will always bring comfort, reassurance, and restoration as powerful as the breaking of the dawn after a terrible night of tossing and turning.

A few months after Dana's death, her co-workers gathered for a staff retreat. One of them invited the whole team to her home, a beautiful place set in the woods. It was one of the very first really warm days of spring, and they were able to gather for part of the day out on the deck. They were enjoying their lunch outdoors when something caught Leslie's eye. When she gasped, everyone looked at her to make sure she was OK. At that point, she was sitting there, open-mouthed, pointing at a small white feather that rested by itself on the flat top of the deck railing. It took her a moment to collect herself enough to tell everyone about Dana's promise of a white feather. There were no other feathers about, and no apparent source of this feather in evidence. Leslie hadn't thought about it for quite a while; she had to admit she had even forgotten about it for a time. But there it was.

Like the psalmist, like Ezekiel and Martha and Mary, like Dana, we are those who watch for the morning. Our hope defines us as a people. Each time we get out of bed with a sense of hope and purpose in this broken world, it is a small act of resurrection. Yes, these bones can live, because the God who acts on our behalf. Yes, the stone will be rolled away from what entombs us, because of God in Christ who weeps for us and raises us up. Morning comes. Watch for it. Amen.

\*Names and other identifying information related to Dana have been changed to protect privacy.