

“Dying and Rising”

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

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

March 29, 2020 (The Fifth Sunday of Lent)

Chautauqua Institution, on Chautauqua Lake in Upstate New York, is an idyllic establishment unlike any other in America. Dedicated after the Civil War to the advancement of religion, education, the arts, and recreation, it offers a sunny summer of public worship, relevant lectures, accredited classes, first-rate symphony, professional theatre and opera, popular entertainment, a variety of sport and play, solitary immersion in a best-seller, spirited conversation, reunion with friends, escape from life’s routines, evening ice cream, and—if you can find the time—welcomed relaxation. This original Chautauqua spawned the historic Chautauqua movement of traveling preachers and revivals, established at civic parks and assembly grounds all across America in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s.

You have heard me sing Chautauqua’s praises in the past. Our parents took my sister, my brother and me to Chautauqua for a week or two, every other summer, when we were kids. After gaining admission at the gate, we would weave past joggers, elders leaning on canes, and babies in carriages on lanes lined right and left with colorful, gingerbread cottages and their classic porches, on our way to unload the car at the hotel operated by the United Church of Christ. Those summers, we would be transported to a Norman Rockwell-like world, anchored by a manicured central plaza always alive with activity and blooming trees. For six decades, I have regularly returned with kids and grandkids to that cherished memory of my childhood.

One recent winter, I had reason to visit Chautauqua off-season. On a wet, chilly, gray day, I entered freely through the gate, untended in February, and drove down the narrow, empty lanes without interruption, toward a lifeless plaza of barren trees. Along the way, I had passed cottage after

cottage draped in bland, protective canvass that hid those classic American porches. In wintertime, I discovered, Chautauqua was as dormant as Norman Rockwell's world is now. In wintertime, I discovered, Chautauqua is as buried as Rockwell's Saturday Evening Post caricatures are now.

But that recent winter, a block from the lifeless plaza, I watched hundreds of construction workers busily rebuilding Chautauqua's 122-year old, 4000-seat amphitheater. The beloved, original structure had been demolished, in favor of a more functional design that would accommodate the expectations of modern entertainers and audiences. The dramatic change, authorized by the Institution's Board of Trustees, had generated organized opposition by local and national preservationists, including the National Historic Preservation Trust itself, and had even caused the resignation of the Institution's president. Nevertheless, a new stage would replace the one on which the iconic Pat Boone once gave my daughter a bouquet of roses and a kiss, on her eleventh birthday. Boone's crowd-pleasing gesture in 1982, elated an overflow audience, and a proud dad.

On that winter visit, I was assured by the project's foreman that the amphitheater's renovation would be completed by the time the season opened.

Chautauqua dying, Chautauqua rising.

I was assured that the next season's visitors would once again weave through joggers and baby carriages, past colorful, gingerbread cottages with classic porches, the winter protections stored away, toward a plaza alive with activity and blooming branches.

Chautauqua dying, Chautauqua rising.

I was assured that entertainers, lecturers, and preachers would once again inspire overflow audiences, from the renovated stage of a refurbished amphitheater, a short walk beyond the manicured central park.

Chautauqua dying, Chautauqua rising.

This Lenten season we've been following the lectionary readings, and this Sunday's scriptures are masterful reminders that keeping faith in God will turn dying into rising. In truth, a life of faith in God is a constant cycle of dying and rising...dying and rising...dying and rising.

In the story from the Hebrew Scriptures, Ezekiel finds that God (overriding the protests of the preservationists and even the National Historic Preservation Trust) can raise dry bones from graves in the valley, by breathing life into them again. God will resurrect.

Symbolically, the message is that if the Israelites will keep faith, the day will come when the nation, forcibly dispersed west to Egypt and east to Babylon, will be reunited in Jerusalem by God.

Israel dying, Israel rising.

In the story from the Christian Scriptures, Jesus (overriding the protests of the preservationists and even the National Historic Preservation Trust traveling with him) breathes life again into the dead body of his good friend Lazarus. One might imagine the repulsive stench of the tomb overwhelmed by the pleasing fragrance of flowers laid at the grave.

Lazarus dying, Lazarus rising.

Symbolically, the message is that if one keeps faith, the day will come when God will breathe living spirit into any earthly suffering, any earthly challenge. Jesus reassures a doubting Martha with revealing words: "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."

Some yoga instructors will reference "The Law of Impermanence", a Buddhist concept declaring that in this world there is nothing that is fixed and permanent. That is, impermanence and change are the undeniable truths of our existence.

Life itself is a constant movement from darkness...to light...to darkness...to light. Gray days of winter...to sunny days of summer. Suffering...to healing. Dying... to rising.

Keep faith, and the day will come when God breathes living spirit into dry bones.

My cherished Chautauqua is right now in the midst of that movement from darkness to light. During the very week after Chautauqua's season closed last August, Jared Jacobsen died in a highway accident. I mentioned this to you in church at the time. Jared was the revered, talented, beloved organist and worship leader at Chautauqua, for decades. I am blessed to have spoken with Jared in July, when he readily gave me a copy of the season's Sunday worship resource, which is not supposed to leave the amphitheater's secure collection, seemingly at the risk of imprisonment!

This coming season, Jared Jacobsen will be deeply missed, but a different, qualified professional musician will perform from the bench of Chautauqua's historic Massey Memorial Organ. The day will come when God breathes living spirit into Chautauqua's dry bones.

Darkness...to light. Suffering...to healing. Dying...to rising. Let God resurrect.

Keep faith, and the day will come when God breathes living spirit into dry bones.

A job that sucks your energy and tests your self-esteem? Keep faith! Let God resurrect!

A son or daughter who ignores your counsel? Keep faith! Let God resurrect!

A bruised relationship, seemingly too difficult to salvage? Keep faith! Let God resurrect!

A persistent pandemic, suffocating society, numbing a nation? Keep faith! Let God resurrect!

The day will come when God breathes living spirit into our dry bones.

This is according to the prophecy of Ezekiel.

This is according to the Word, in the Gospel of John.