

THE GRATEFUL DEAD

Sermon, April 10, 2011

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-44, Romans 8:5-11

We just sang the hymn, “Open My Eyes, That I May See.” You’ve heard it said, “Seeing is believing.” Well, the Bible often reverses that, by telling us believing is seeing. We don’t always trust our senses; we actually see what we believe. And it is in believing, it is when our eyes of faith are opened, that we *really* begin to see. It is in believing that we have hope.

We read in our Old Testament lectionary that Ezekiel was taken by the Spirit of the Lord to a valley filled with dry bones. The Lord asked Ezekiel, *“Son of man, can these bones live?”* Looking around at all those shattered, dry, hopeless skeletons, Ezekiel responded, *“Oh, sovereign Lord, You alone know.”* Then the Lord told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, to start preaching to the bones. God even gave Ezekiel the sermon he was to preach: *“Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you and you will come to life! Then you will know that I am the Lord.”* If I were Ezekiel, I might have gently suggested the Lord first bring these bones back to life, and *then* I’d do a little preaching. *“See?”* I’d say, *“See what God can do? Seeing is believing, after all!”* More often than not, though, God simply does not work that way. God calls us to believe without seeing, and to step out on faith and speak and act on that belief. So here’s Ezekiel, standing in the middle of this great valley filled with dead, dry, scattered bones. Maybe he’s thinking, *“I’ve preached to some pretty dead congregations before, but this takes the cake.”* What does he say? *“Good morning, uh, bones, it’s good to see so many of you gathered here today.”* No, he tells the dead, dry, scattered bones the message God gave Him: *“Don’t give up hope, dry bones! God is going to cause you to LIVE again. You will enjoy life again. You will hope and live and fight again! And you will know that God is God.”* And you know the rest of the story: *“... the foot bones got connected to the ankle bones, the knee bones got connected to the leg bones, and dem bones arise agin.”* As Ezekiel preached, the bones were resurrected into a mighty army.

God calls us to obey, God calls us to act, God calls us to speak even when it seems as futile and hopeless as exhorting a valley full of dead, dry bones to action. Obey, then you will see! Believing is seeing. It’s God’s way to make room for hope, to get us to exercise and develop our faith. For it is hope ... biblical hope ... that brings us back to life; it is the loss of hope that is so deadly. Hope rises up from our bones and chooses to believe in the power and goodness of a God who can bring new life even to the dead ... in spite of how things might be in the present. Hope is always a choice. Despair is always a choice, as well. To choose despair is to willfully embrace the deadness that is there, hang on to it, make it an absolute, and say, *“It is always going to be like this.”* However, to choose hope is to embrace a future based on the promises of God, a future you may not have even yet imagined. Hope ... biblical hope ... never looks just “at how it is,” but at God’s vision and promise for how it will be. Believing is seeing. It is in believing, it is through the eyes of faith, that we really begin to see. It is in believing that we have hope.

And Jesus said to Martha, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die, but have life everlasting. Do you believe this?”* “Yes Lord,” she told him. *“I believe. You are the Christ, the son of God, who was to come into the world.”* And with that, Martha took off like a shot and ran home to her sister Mary, and I’m sure she was filled with anticipation that something good was about to happen.

In December 1982, Will Lee, the actor who played store proprietor Mr. Hooper on Sesame Street, died. Mr. Hooper had been part of the children’s show since its inception in 1969. Joan Ganz Cooney, president of the Children’s Television Workshop, the producers of the show, said in a prepared statement, *“He gave millions of children the message that the old and the young have a lot to say to each other.”* The New York Times reported that on Sesame Street, Will Lee’s Mr. Hooper ranked ahead of all live cast members in recognition by young audiences. His bowtie and horn rimmed reading glasses became his trademark. Big Bird, who never could properly pronounce Mr. Hooper’s name (*“Mr. Looper”, “Mr. Howper”, etc; he would address the proprietor who always provided Big Bird with his patented Birdseed milkshakes.*) Lee’s departure posed a difficult set of issues for The Children’s Television Workshop. Should they deal at all with the subject of death? If so, how would they explain it to their estimated ten million viewers, most of whom are under the age of six? A staff writer described it this way: *“We asked ourselves: What do we want the kids to know? What can they absorb? What might open up things we can’t answer? After all, we try to create boundaries around what we can safely teach without doing any damage.”*

Child-development experts and counselors who specialized in loss and separation were called in, and they provided some specific “*don’ts*” for dealing with death on the show so as not to unduly alarm and/or

cause unnecessary fear and consternation to children: *"Don't say Mr. Hooper got sick and died, because you don't always die when you get sick. Don't say he was old, because all children think their parents are old. Don't say he went to the hospital and died, because people go to the hospital all the time."* They also advised the staff to avoid religious issues altogether, such as saying that Mr. Hooper had gone to heaven. *(Now, on one hand, I sympathize: the audience of Sesame Street was large and varied greatly in religious belief or lack thereof. On the other hand, however, I have to respond, "What is left to say?")* The producers decided they were going to just communicate a few basic messages. *"He's gone ... acknowledge the reality." "He won't be back." "He'll be missed." "He will live on in your memory."* They also wanted the cast to express how they felt about Will, and they wanted the children to know that death stimulates a full range of emotions, and that's OK. You're sad, you're angry, you're frustrated, you're confused all at the same time. Again, though, I was struck as a father and as a pastor they could offer no message of hope!

The show that resulted was Episode 1839, now known to fans as *"Farewell, Mr. Hooper"* and it aired on Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1983. It was quickly selected by the Daytime Emmys as being one of the Ten Most Influential Moments in daytime television. In one segment, Big Bird walks on camera and says to the cast: *"I just drew pictures of all my grown-up friends on Sesame Street and I'm going to give them to you."* He passes out sketches and the cast members ooh and ahh over the likenesses. He's left with Mr. Hooper's picture. *"I can't wait till Mr. Hooper (sic) sees it," says Big Bird. "Say, where is he? I want to give it to him."* One cast member, Maria, explains: *"Big Bird, don't you remember? We told you ... Mr. Hooper died. He's dead."* Big Bird says, *"Oh yeah, I remember. Well ... I'll give it to him when he comes back."* Another cast member, Olivia, gets up from her chair and touches Big Bird saying, *"Big Bird, Mr. Hooper's not coming back."* *"Why not?"* Big Bird asks. *"Big Bird," she explains, "when people die, they don't come back."* Big Bird: *"He's never coming back?"* Olivia: *"Never."* Big Bird: *"Well I don't understand. You know, everything was just fine. I mean, why does it have to be this way? Give me one good reason."* Olivia: *"Big Bird, it has to be this way ... because."* Big Bird: *"Just because?"* Olivia: *"Just because."* Big Bird: *"Oh."*

And that's true, Big Bird. They don't come back. *Unless ... they happen to be a friend of Jesus.*

That, in a nutshell, is today's lesson and message of hope from John's Gospel.

I've lost count of how many times I have led or attended funeral services. When I look out at the tear-stained faces of the broken-hearted family and friends of the deceased, what do I say? Isn't there something more that can be said than, "He's gone. He won't be back. He'll be missed." I really do not think any of the sentimental drivel about loved ones living on in our hearts and memories is of much comfort or help. But when we hear the promises of Jesus, *"I am the Resurrection and the Life, he who believes in me shall never die, but have life everlasting. In my Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you. I go now to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, to receive you unto myself, that where I am, you may be also."* Two things happen when people hear, really hear, these promises: First, they are reminded of a joyful, certain and *real* hope. Yes, we are sad for a time, but not forever! Second, if people are paying attention, they start to examine the lives they are living right now. Trust me on this ... death always comes too soon. And you cannot stare at a casket without asking yourself some ultimate questions. Such as, *"Am I using my time well? Am I loving the people I have with me while I have this time? Am I making good memories that I can spend an eternity reminiscing about? Am I working for things that make an eternity of difference, or am I just pushing pushing pushing for things that really don't matter?"* The promise of Jesus is that there is life ... real life ... beyond the shadow we call death! Death is not the end.

Believing is seeing. It is in believing, it is through the eyes of faith, that we really begin to see. It is in believing that we have hope. I entitled this sermon "The Grateful Dead," partially because I was reaching for a catchy title, but mainly because each of these lectionary texts this morning is about God's power to graciously give life to ones who were once dead ... a dead nation, Jesus' dead friend Lazarus, and all who *(including us!)* once lived under the sentence of death ... all of whom are grateful for the gift of life. These readings affirm what happens when we take God at His word, when believing is seeing. Those who believe, see ... they see their lives change, they see their purpose reordered, they see their destiny changed, and they are given sure and certain and unshakeable hope. The God whose word revived Israel's dry bones, the God whose living Word called forth Lazarus from the grave, the God who raised Jesus from the grave, is the same God whose living Spirit empowers and sustains us and gives us hope even now. And He is the same God who will one day call all of us by name and give us life beyond life, life that will never, ever know death again.

As Jesus said to Martha, He says to us, "Do you believe this?"

May we answer as Martha answered, "Yes Lord, I believe." And run back to our homes, our communities, our places of work with excited anticipation of what He will do next.