

Alive

John 11:1-26

Introduction

Since we worshipped last Sunday morning, our friends in Hollywood held another one of their many annual award shows – the 98th Academy Awards ... otherwise known as “the Oscars.” So, in honor of their big night, I thought I would open my sermon today by sharing some of my favorite classic movie lines. Let's see if you know them and can fill in these blanks.

- Life is like a box of _____ (chocolates) (Forrest Gump)
- There's no place like _____ (home) (Wizard of Oz)
- You can't handle _____ (the truth) (A Few Good Men)

One more line that is a perfect lead-in to today's sermon. It is a lesser-known line, I think, so I will give you a hint on this one. It comes from a movie starring Bruce Willis and Haley Joel Osment. The movie was titled “The Sixth Sense.” Here's the line:

- I see _____ (dead people)

Did you notice how all three of our readings today had to do with dead people?

- In Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision of an entire valley filled with dried bones. Hundreds of dead people.
- In Romans, the writer states that “the mind governed by the flesh is death.” That's millions of dead people.
- And, of course, in our gospel we meet a dead man named Lazarus.

Throughout my sermon prep for today wherever I looked, I kept seeing dead people! Move over Haley Joel Osment! You are not alone.

By now, you know my goal in this series of Lenten services has been to help us see the Kingdom of God at work in our midst. We Lutherans love to pray the Lord's Prayer, and so we are always mouthing these words from that prayer:

THY KINGDOM COME

Typically, when we think Kingdom thoughts and pray Kingdom prayers, we think and pray about things that are alive and vibrant, not things that are dead and dying. After all, Jesus Himself announced:

The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

For us, the Kingdom is not about death. It is about life. Life to the full!

- We don't say “I see dead people.”
- We say “I see people living life abundantly.”

Of all the stories in the Gospels about the life of Jesus – personal opinion here – I think this one impacted Jesus the most

- After all, this is the only story where Jesus was so overcome with emotion that the Gospel writer records everybody's favorite memory verse:

Jesus wept. (John 11:35)

Lazarus was his friend. Maybe his best friend. Lazarus and his two sisters apparently made their home available to Jesus whenever he passed through, so Jesus spent a lot of time with them. And now Lazarus was dead.

- In one sense, Jesus allowed him to die. Or at least that is how it seems.
- Early in our Gospel reading Jesus gets word that Lazarus is on his death bed, and his sister wants Jesus to come intervene. But the text tells us:

So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days ... (John 11:6)

- That would be like calling the emergency squad, and them wanting to set up an appointment later in the week.
- She wanted Jesus to come now!
- When Jesus finally does show up, Martha confronts him:

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11:21)

In that moment, the Kingdom comes. THY KINGDOM COME. Jesus speaks those familiar Kingdom words:

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. (John 11:26)

Sounds like a lot of confusion at first. But look carefully. He says: You can live even though you die. And you can live and never die. Let me make three observations:

OBSERVATION #1: IT IS POSSIBLE LOOK ALIVE AND STILL BE DEAD

I love Ezekiel 37. The Valley of the Dry Bones. It's a great story.

Dem bones dem bones, dem dry bones! Now heed the word of the Lord.

When Ezekiel arrived at this valley in his vision, he found a massive amount of disconnected body parts. Like a purchase from IKEA there was some assembly required. God told the prophet to put those pieces together. Get those ankle bones connected to the leg bones, and those leg bones connected to the hip bones. You don't need the instruction manual. Just prophesy. And Ezekiel does.

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked,

and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. (Ezekiel 37:7-8)

The parts were in all the right places. Unlike every IKEA item I have ever assembled, there were no leftover parts. Everything fit. The people looked alive, but they were still very dead.

OBSERVATION #2: THE KEY TO KINGDOM LIFE IS THE PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT

Why were they still dead even though they looked alive? Ezekiel identified the problem correctly:

There was no breath in them. (Ezekiel 37:8)

The Hebrew language has a word "ruach" that is accurately translated "wind," "breath," and "spirit."

The writer of Romans tells sticks with the Spirit interpretive option to tell us:

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:11)

How does life happen? Because of His Spirit living in us. That Spirit that gave life to the dead Jesus gives life to us as well.

I had a chance to hear another pastor in town share his faith story this week. He talked about growing up in a family where everyone THOUGHT they were alive from God's perspective.

- They went to church occasionally when he was younger.
- They always talked about "The man upstairs" and made sure they did charitable things on occasion to keep "the man upstairs" happy.
- But it wasn't until he met a genuine Christian, and then became a Christian himself, that he realized he only had the appearance of life before.

Many people in this world pursue all kinds of pleasures, thinking that by so doing they are ALIVE! But unless those things are Kingdom things, there is no life there.

- Doing the occasional good deed to keep the man upstairs appeased, is not a sign of life.
- Like Bruce Willis in the movie I mentioned earlier, they are actually dead and just don't know it.

One of the scariest verses in the Bible states the problem like this:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in

your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:21-23)

OBSERVATION #3: KINGDOM LIFE IS ETERNAL LIFE

Look once again at the Kingdom statement Jesus spoke at the graveside of his friend Lazarus:

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. (John 11:25)

When you become a Christian – whenever that happens in your lifetime – you begin a new life – an eternal life.

- Do you want to make people think you are weird? Tell them that you are going to live forever.
- The next time someone tries to sell you life insurance, tell them you don't need it because you are never going to die.

One night the great evangelist Dwight Moody stood before the crowd that had gathered for that night's revival service. Earlier that day the Chicago newspaper had published his obituary, but there Moody was – very much alive. He told that:

Someday you will read in the papers that Moody is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now. I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born in the Spirit in 1855. That which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit shall live forever. (Dwight Moody)

APPLICATION

That is what Easter is all about. When Christ was resurrected, he conquered death. You might say that Easter is the antidote to death.

That's good news. Very good news. Death has no power over the one who has been filled with God's Spirit.

Our memory verse for this Lenten season:

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13-14)

Amen.