

In his novel, "Street of Knives," a novel about the life of Aaron Burr, Cyril Harris offers a powerful picture of a person struggling to believe in God. The characters are in a boat, going down the Mississippi River, when a young man named Hugh walks over to Blennerhassett, who is standing at the edge of the boat, staring intently down at the water. Hugh asks: "Have you lost something, squire?" Blennerhassett replies, "Aye, Hugh, I have." "Then," said Hugh, "I guess it is gone, for there's at least six feet of water below." Since Blennerhassett does not seem to be listening, Hugh asks what he has dropped overboard. Blennerhassett turns to him and says: "Lad, do you see this handrail? I am leaning on it and you are too. That's what it is here for, to lean on, to keep you and me from falling overboard. Well, lad, that is what I have lost -- a handrail -- something to hold me back when I get too near the edge. It has to be strong, and it has to be there. Some call it 'God.' I have lost it, and I am looking for it." (from Lane Butts' "Living in the Lion's Den," preached 3/3/96 in Monroeville, Alabama, altered by F Eddins)

The scriptures for today were about hope, hope even in the face of being dried up, completely bound, unable to move, or even dead. God can provide life - and a handrail - right where it doesn't seem possible. God can provide possibilities just where there seems no life.

In his vision, the prophet Ezekiel was taken out to view dried up, useless bones, and then God asked him, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel's answer placed everything back in God's lap, so to speak: "You know, Lord." We do well to notice the wisdom of this prophet in his response: God knows and we do not know the worth and possibility of every single thing; and, God has the final answer even to things that seem as completely confounding as dried-up bones or a four-day dead friend.

The setting of Ezekiel's vision was that of exile. His nation, Judah, had been devastated. The Temple had been destroyed. Where there had once been the promise of God's faithfulness to generation upon generation, now the people felt deserted, forgotten by God. They had nothing more than the "dry bones" of dead hope.

The prophet was given a vision, though, of a new future made possible by nothing except the faithfulness of God to the covenant. In this vision, the hopeless valley became the field of God's miraculous power. God is proclaimed as the *only one* who can bring life where there is no life at all.

In the Gospel lesson, Lazarus was dead. Dead, wrapped, and buried. Jesus had for some reason delayed after he'd been told of Lazarus's illness, so that by the time Jesus arrived the only thing left to do was mourn. When Jesus finally got around to heading for Bethany, his disciples warned him, "Your enemies are out there, just waiting to kill you, and yet you are going there again?" Jesus paid them no mind, so Thomas said, resignedly, "Let us go with him, that we can all die together." So death was everywhere. Lazarus was dying, the disciples were afraid they would have to die. But Jesus went on. The sisters were hurt and angry at Jesus, for they believed that if he had come when they'd called him, their brother would not have died.

Up to this point, it's a normal story, quite believable. But then, Jesus went to the tomb, demanded that they roll away the stone closing it up, prayed, and then called Lazarus to come out of death and into life. "Unbind him, and let him go."

Perhaps Jesus Christ is saying those same words to us, to our world. Let yourselves be unbound from all the trappings of death, from all the things that suck life out of you. Free yourself from the constant fear of death so that you can live. We are a culture obsessed with death. The newspapers and networks report these shootings and fatal accidents and disasters because they know that is what people want to hear about. We are obsessed with death. We are drawn to hear about things, perhaps so we can say "It happened somewhere else, not to me." Yet we are all, sooner or later, going to have to face death. That is inevitable, the question is, what are we going to do between now and then? Someone once said, "The world has its deadlines; Christ offers lifelines." ... The raising of Lazarus story shows that when Jesus arrives at places of death, the dead gain life.

The bones in Ezekiel's vision sprang to life after lifetimes of death.... Lazarus came forth from the tomb. During Holy Week, we will remember how Jesus himself entered the tomb of death. We will read once again the tedious story of how the powers of death had their way with Jesus, how the disciples failed him, how friends tried to save their own skins, how trusted companions betrayed and denied Jesus just as the religious establishment of the day used all its power to have him killed. We'll see how hopeless it all felt, how the world seemed to be bound by self-interests and blindness.

The bones somehow receiving the breath of God, the bound-up corpse staggering out of a tomb, are PREVIEWS of Easter, hints of what God can do in our world and in our lives.

Tensions, discouragements, wars, budget messes, joblessness, broken relationships, drug addiction, crime, failure, illness, death.... All these things bind us and deplete the abundant quality of our living. We yearn for what Jesus proclaimed, earlier in John: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10). (pause)

Years ago I received a letter from a friend who lived in Oklahoma. She enclosed a little brochure her church gives out, on the front of which is glued an eraser. Around the eraser is written: "God can erase all your mistakes!" Inside it proclaimed faith in God's ability to make of us a "new creation." A new creation freed from anxiety and self-absorption and consumerism and desperation - no matter how difficult life is - because of the assurance that there is a "railing," God, on which we can lean.... UNBOUND because we know that God is with us in every moment, calling us to trust God and promising us that God will see us through all of life and all of death and beyond.

I close with a brief story. In Europe a strong wind blew in and destroyed a great stained glass window of a cathedral. The sexton was cleaning up afterwards when a man who had heard about the accident came and asked for the broken pieces. The shards were given to him. Later,

he returned and presented the cathedral with a beautiful Rose window, constructed from the broken pieces. God can do even more with the hurting parts of our lives. God's redemption includes using once-broken human lives which have been reclaimed and re-spirited - infused with God's breath - for God's purposes.

Many of us are looking for life, watching it slide by quickly and wondering whether or not we really have a meaningful place in it. Society tells us we are an expendable number. Other drivers tell us we are in the way. Politicians and corporations don't really seem to care about us, other than to get our vote or our dollar. But beyond television and the demands of our days is the whisper of God: "You are mine. I know you - everything good and bad about you - and I love you. Let me be your railing, your guide and your guard. Breathe in the presence and power of my Holy Spirit, and I will fill you with life and help you discover purpose for your every day."

This is abundant life, offered by our Lord to all who are looking for life, real life, in this challenging world. May each of us be freed to live it, by the grace and power of God. Amen.