

Upon This Rock
What Good is God?, Part VII
John 11:1-45
Matthew 7:24-29
April 10, 2011
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There is a program in Portland, Oregon, called the "Rebuilding Center." It's a nonprofit, located in an economically depressed area of northeast Portland, a neighborhood that needs job opportunities. One of the partners, Shane Endicott, at the age of 27, had always been interested in the construction and demolition business. But he and his partners didn't want to do business as usual and "crunch and dump, grind up all that useful wood, metal, and brick and dump it in a landfill, then go out and chop down more trees and mine more iron to build something else." Instead, the Rebuilding Center demolishes, by hand, wooden or brick houses, guts entire apartment buildings, and removes old kitchen cabinets for reuse. The Center renews the used building materials and sells them to the public at half the cost of retail or less. It's a socially responsible business with close ties to the community. They started with a few folks working out of a garage; now they've expanded to a half-block-long building. They have 36 full-time employees, and customers from all over the city are coming to get bargains on toilets and light fixtures, roofing, and door frames (<http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/living-economies/breaking-down-buildings-building-up-a-neighborhood>). "Breaking Down Buildings, Building Up a Neighborhood"—that's what they're doing.

There is a lot of breaking down in life, but the building up is sometimes hard to come by.

The lectionary text for today, the story of the raising of Lazarus, describes a family coping with breaking down. That's what illness is—the body breaking down, and relationships breaking down with anticipated death and grief. Lazarus' sisters were concerned that their brother was ill, concerned enough to send a message to Jesus, their close friend. But Jesus didn't stop everything and go; in fact, the text says clearly "after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was" (John 11:6). That wasn't good enough for Martha! She said to Jesus, when he finally arrived after Lazarus had been in the tomb 4 days: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And then later Mary said the very same words. They were trying to lay a guilt trip on Jesus. They had wanted Jesus to stop the disease with a miracle. They wanted him to intervene and make everything all right.

And we can identify with Martha and Mary. When our loved one is ill, we quickly rush the person to the hospital and gather the family. We want to do something to stop the breaking down. But interestingly enough, Jesus said, "This illness does not lead to death," and later he said to Martha, "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" (John 11:25-26). Even though Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead that day, on another day later Lazarus died. And we all will. Our bodies will break down. Of course, we don't want them to break down prematurely or needlessly. But I have seen families of people in their

nineties, unprepared for illness and death of their loved ones. We seem not to have enough confidence in God to accept the breaking down that inevitably happens when a person is dying (The Fellowship of United Methodists in Music and Worship Arts (Apr. 4, 2011).

The crux of the matter seems to be Jesus' question to Martha after he tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life." He asks her simply, "Do you believe this?" (11:26).

When things are breaking down, our ability to build up depends upon the way we answer this question: "Do you believe this?"

Do *you* believe that "those who believe in [Jesus], even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in [Jesus] will never die"?

I wonder if you can say you believe this. For me, I can say, "Yes, I believe this," because to me this means that, we all will die, but because I believe in something more than physical life, I believe that God allows us also to live in a new way after death. And in that sense, we will never die. Do you believe this? If you do, perhaps it's easier to face the death of a loved one, or your own death.

Jesus is not worried about the breaking down of the body and the impending death of Lazarus. Yes, he will weep and so will Mary and Martha; of course, they will weep. But in the face of death, they are not left empty-handed.

The Church is the place where we find the resources we need in the face of disease and death. It's here that we practice answering Jesus' question, "Do you believe this?"

We had a friend who had a great deal of abdominal pain. Patsy kept going to the doctor with complaints, and the doctor kept sending her home. Finally they did exploratory surgery and found a giant mass, too large to remove. Her colon ruptured in the operating room, and there was nothing they could do but let the incision drain, keep her comfortable, and start hospice.

Patsy and her husband experienced the five stages of grief that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross outlines: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Most people experience some of these stages when adjusting to their impending death. For Patsy, it was: Denial: "This can't be happening." Anger: "Why didn't they operate sooner?" Bargaining: "If I just can live long enough to get rid of the infection, I'll do whatever it takes to be positive." Depression: "I can't handle this; I wish I'd died on the operating table." And finally, Acceptance: "I know I'm going to die, and at least I have a little time to say good-bye."

Patsy's body had broken down, no doubt about it. There were not going to be any miracles, and yet, in the last month of her life, she had reunions with her family and friends. She and her husband had plenty of time to express their love to each other, to pray together, and to die peacefully at home with candles and flowers and the people she loved by her side.

I saw my friend an hour before she took her last breath, and her daughter said she saw her mother's soul depart from her body as she died. Patsy had the faith to die knowing that truly she would never die.

"I am the resurrection and the life....Do you believe this?" That is Jesus' question.

Our bodies break down, and so do our societies. Right about when Barack Obama was elected President, our economy was breaking down. Since the economic downturn that started in 2008, people have lost jobs, homes, healthcare, and to some extent, hope. Rohnert Park-Cotati public schools are in a very serious fiscal crisis. Due to changing demographics, our community is growing grayer and poorer. Businesses are closing down. People in our congregation are having to relocate. Though some of us may be managing quite well as individuals and families, many of our neighbors' lives are breaking down. As the community breaks down, what will help it build back up?

"I am the resurrection and the life....Do you believe this" for our society?

Phillip Yancey gave a talk at the Church Health Center in Memphis, Tennessee. This is an outreach program of another St. John's United Methodist Church, this one in midtown Memphis. At this church, the Associate Pastor is also a medical doctor who had a vision of providing the working uninsured with excellent healthcare. The church and the Church Health Center are located in the city, where there are many signs of social breakdown. This is the city where the big tourist attractions are Graceland, a monument to Elvis Presley, and the National Civil Rights Museum, a monument to a shameful chapter of American history. 43 years ago this week, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. The Church Health Center, though, is a living monument to the alternative vision of the gospel. Though lives have broken down in poverty, racism, disease, and hopelessness, a local healthcare program of The United Methodist Church is also building up lives. The founder of the program, Dr. Scott Morris, says: "Being healthy is never about the absence of disease. It is always about living our lives in the midst of a community that brings us joy and provides us with love. Surely, that is what "coming home" should always be about. Sadly, that experience eludes many people in their biological families, but in chosen family, in church it is still possible. No one should settle for a life without it" (http://chreader.org/contentPage.aspx?resource_id=622&listWebPage_id=1).

This church in Memphis builds community with three worship services: a traditional one that focuses on the creative arts on Sunday, a mid-week service with dinner, singing and prayer, and a third recovery service for a sense of resurrection and hope in the midst of breakdown that happens with addiction. This church is feeding the soul and healing the body. It is taking what has broken down and building it back up again.

"I am the resurrection and the life.... Do you believe this?"

The Bible is full of dichotomies, like breaking down and building up...In the Sermon on the Mount, there are two gates: the narrow gate and the wide gate; two harvests: the plentiful one and the scarce one; and two builders: the wise one and the foolish one. "The wise man

built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall." "The foolish man...built his house on sand. The rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell" (Mt. 24-27).

In some ways the Church is breaking down. Perhaps it has been built on sand and not on rock. Perhaps the Church has relied on the *institution* of the Church to be the Church's foundation. The floods have come, and the winds have blown and beat against the Church, and it is falling. Many of the churches in this Conference are considering going to part-time pastors because they are having trouble paying their share of the apportionments, along with the utilities, and taxes and staff salaries....

But I don't think St. John's is breaking down. We are paying our share; we are growing in numbers and in commitment. I'm not saying we aren't at some risk. There could be a tsunami—we could lose members due to job changes or death. We could rely too heavily on a pastor or on a program or on one style of worship, or we could stop looking outward and care only about ourselves...

In other words, we could lose our firm foundation. That foundation is in the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the belief that there is always hope. There were really two ways of thinking in Bethany where Lazarus lay about to die. There was Martha and Mary's vantage point, a calendar of urgency—"Why didn't you drop everything and come, Jesus?" And there was God's perspective, a calendar of confidence—"I am the resurrection and the life...Do you believe it?"

I hope St. John's will build on the rock. We'll be on rock-solid faith if we love God and serve humanity. That's a firm foundation that can weather any storm in life.