

Resurrection and Blooming Forsythia

[Ezekiel 37:1-14; Luke 24:1-5; Ephesians 4:17-24](#)

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We live by beliefs. You sit here under tons of concrete and steel. You remain here because you believe that the roof will stay up there. What would you do if the ceiling started to make noise, ominous rumbles? Then, your belief would change! Quickly! Our lives are lived by what we believe, even if the belief is a negative belief. Even if we are nihilistic and proclaim, "I don't believe in anything!"---that is a belief. What we believe about God, about life, about ourselves shapes who we are and our attitude toward everything.

PRAYER O God, faithful and loving, the definer of truth, you know each one of us. You know what we believe---not just what we say that we believe---but what we believe in our souls. If we believe something that needs tweaking or a complete change, get the message through to us. Work with us, Lord, until we get it. In the name of our supreme ruler and savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

John Alexander in his book "The Warrior's Edge" writes about reality maps. A reality map is a mental map of our belief system. It is a way of speaking of what we believe is real and not real, and what we expect.

Let me give you an example of a reality map expectation. In 1597, a young sailor returned to his home port in Madrid, Spain. Juan Combe had been to the New World, and he was quite a celebrity. People flocked to hear stories of his ventures among the natives. He was wine and dined, the toast of the town. Then one day it rained, and Juan Combe walked through the streets of Madrid wearing a wonderful cape that kept him and his clothes dry.

Folks thought this cape must be magic. Juan explained that such coated capes were widely used by the natives in the New World. But his explanations did not satisfy the authorities who arrested him. A judge examined the curious garment, questioned Juan at length, and then gave his verdict. Juan was declared guilty of wearing a cape through which water would not pass. (Horror of horrors!) Obviously Juan was interfering with the will of God, who sent the rain "to drench the just and the unjust." Such evil interference was witchcraft punishable by death. That was what their reality map told them about [what?] rubber. And, about God.

Our beliefs dominate what we will make happen or allow to happen or expect to happen. The Apostle wrote to the infant congregation in Ephesus, using Markus Barth's translation, "Now in the Lord's [name] I say and insist upon the following: No longer conduct yourselves as do the Gentiles in the futility of their mind. Intellectually they are blacked out. Because of their inherent refusal to know [God] and of the petrification of their hearts, they are excluded from the life of God." (Markus Barth's translation in "The Anchor Bible, Ephesians 4-6.") Tough talk! Their beliefs excluded them from the life of God. Their thoughts lead them to futility.

In our beliefs, you and I have a place for God. I assume you do or you would not be here this morning. We have not blacked out God or petrified our hearts toward God. What do you believe about God? What do you expect of God?

With those questions in mind, listen to what God taught Ezekiel about God.

Ezekiel 37:1-11 The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. [Picture a valley filled with the bones of dead people.] He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. [They have been dead a long time.] He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act...." In his imagination, Ezekiel saw a valley covered with the dried up bones of dead people. Stark. Morbid. A commanding image. And, God asked Ezekiel the pivotal question, "Can these bones come back to life?" How does your belief answer? What do you expect?

The disciples hid behind locked doors. Their leader had been officially tortured and executed. The servant girl had flung her prickly question at Peter: "You were with Jesus, weren't you?" Would the authorities come after them, too? Their fear was heaped upon their despair. They had hitched themselves to Jesus as the rising star, the one sent from God, and now he was dead in a tomb and they were dead in their souls, dried bones. Can these dead disciples live again?

Very early on Sunday morning the women went to the tomb, intending to anoint Jesus' corpse with spices as was their custom. They found the stone that sealed the tomb rolled away. They went in. No body! Suddenly two men stood by them and asked, "Why are you looking among the dead for one who is alive?"

God makes the dead live! God breathes vitality into dry lives. God may not change the world for us. We still are creatures, subject to

all the limits that all other creature face. We still live in a world of sinful people. We still cope within an environment. In our text, the apostle does not refer to God changing the world for us, or setting aside all illness, crime or death. He talks about God working to renew the inner person, the mind.

In our text, the Apostle describes it: "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." (vv. 22-24)

It is God's way to renew, to recreate the mind! God is like that. Through Moses, God made a new nation out of slaves. Through prophets, God called for reform of corrupt societies and governments to create communities of justice, compassion and honesty. Through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God makes us into new creations. Through John, God presents the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, for the heaven and earth that we know will be no more. God imagines, creates, recreates, reforms, improves. God resurrects! That is the kind of person God is.

Is that what you believe about God?

On this Sunday, one week after celebrating the resurrection of our Lord, what does resurrection teach us to believe about living as God's people?

God wants us to be resurrection-minded. God will be the catalyst to resurrection-thinking.

God's personality and behavior are a paradigm, a theme, a prototype. As God believes, so does God want us to believe. As God behaves, so does God want us to behave. God thinks resurrection. God makes new life. God says, "Believe in me! Believe in what I can do. Believe in what can be."

Some of us feel trapped where we are; we believe that our lives are horrible and will never be anything but horrible. The American victim mentality is sinful. God and the "I'm a victim" thinking don't go together. We may be victims, but if we talk with ourselves about being used and abused, about how hopeless the situation is, about how it never seems to get any better, and we flop in front of the TV with a can of beer to watch other people live, then guess what? That is futility-thinking! There will be no resurrection of the soul --- because our reality map, our beliefs, do not permit us to invite God to work within us.

Expect the God who resurrects to be a catalyst in your life, stimulating your imagination and creativity. Energizing you. Releasing you from negative pasts. Enabling you to love. Awakening thoughts of service. Be Renewed in the spirit of your minds". Expect it! That is who God is and what God does! God breaths life into us!

Do you believe it?

Marilyn Morgan Helleberg tells about a time in her life as a teenager when she questioned her faith. One cold sunless day in early spring, she and her Aunt Alta were doing dishes together in the kitchen of her aunt's old house. They got to talking about Easter, and Marilyn blurted out the question, "How do we know Jesus really came back from the dead? I know the Bible says he did, but how can we be sure that those people didn't just say they saw him? It was all such a long time ago."

Aunt Alta dried her hands on her big apron. "Yes, it was a long time ago," she said, "but this day is as full of meaning as the day of resurrection was. In fact, this moment is as meaningful as any moment in all eternity! Come with me a minute."

Marilyn followed Aunt Alta out the back door, down the rickety wooden steps, and across the backyard, to a clump of gray, dead-looking bushes. An icy March wind whipped the branches back and forth as she reached down and cut off a few pieces about eighteen inches long. Back in the house her Aunt got a milk-glass vase out of the pantry, filled it with water, placed the branches in it, and put it on the table by the west window in the living room. This "bouquet" of dead branches "looked like a bunch of bony-fingered skeletons there, so stark and bare."

But in three days, those dead-looking twigs blossomed into a profusion of bright yellow, gloriously living flowers, even though the bushes outside were still gray. Then her Aunt explained that just as the forsythia bloomed when they brought it into the house, Marilyn needed to bring Christ into the living room of her life. If she would do that, she would know firsthand that the resurrection was true, because his living presence would blossom within her."

When Christ lives within us, we provide space in our thinking for imagining and creating ways of looking at life and fresh, constructive, loving behavior.

Open your minds. Invite God to make you bloom even more brightly than you do.