

~Other Speakers A-F: Richard E. Bieber:

"Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days."

Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you would believe, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou has heard me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

John 11

John Hegarty is a retired art professor at Wayne State University in Detroit. He was a highly talented artist with a growing reputation. John was also part of the art community in New York City and maintained a studio in New York, even while he taught in Detroit.

On the surface John Hegarty was a big success. Yet beneath the surface, the thing that kept him pumped up as he raced back and forth between New York and Detroit --- a 12-hour drive each way --- was alcohol, along with drugs.

Then one day, after 17 years of this rat race, John seemed to hit a stone wall. Something snapped inside him, and he started falling apart. So he gave up being king of the universe, and for 90 days in a row, without missing, he made himself attend AA meetings. During that time something else happened to him: John met Jesus --- for real.

One day John turned up in our church. You never met a humbler man. I went to visit him in his storefront studio. He explained that he had given up painting for the time being. He was shutting down his old life, spending time with God.

John and his wife, Ann, bought a house a few blocks from our church, right next to the Crest Motel, where the prostitutes took their clients. Then one day, in the garage at the back of his house, in front of a huge mirror, John began to paint again. He painted himself wearing nothing but grave wrappings, emerging from his tomb.

John Hegarty understood from his own experience what Jesus did when he raised Lazarus. Lazarus was a corpse. Dead. But when Jesus said, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus, from another world, heard the call and found his way back into that lifeless corpse. He struggled to its feet and came staggering out of its tomb, still tangled up in his grave wrappings.

Jesus said, "Unbind him and let him go." Because, even after Lazarus was alive, he still had to be freed from those grave wrappings.

Likewise, the Lord Jesus who raised John Hegarty from the dead also freed him from his grave wrappings.

So we have two problems: 1. The problem of being dead; 2. The problem of those grave wrappings.

The problem of being dead. When John Hegarty raced back and forth between New York and Detroit, you could say he was alive. He walked, he talked, he painted, he joked with his friends. But inside he was empty. Nothing there. Dead.

No different from a lot of people who look just fine on the surface. They walk and talk and eat and sleep, Have their oatmeal for breakfast and watch TV. But inside, they're empty. Nothing there. Dead.

No different from many religious folks, even respectable Christian folks. On the surface they seem to be cruising along in style. They go to church, they watch TV. They walk and talk and chat with their friends. But inside there's a desert. A vast emptiness. They're dead.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear (who pay attention and act) shall live."

John 5

On the surface we seem to be doing fine. We walk and talk and go for groceries and roar down the freeway. And yet, inside there's an emptiness. We're spiritually hollow. Dead. Then comes the moment when we hear

that Voice. It cuts into our hearts like a hot knife. Now it's up to us to decide whether we're going to pay attention and respond and rise from our grave, or whether we'd prefer to ignore what we hear, allow it to fade and leave us unchanged.

"Those who hear --- who pay attention and respond --- shall live."

The problem of those grave wrappings. Lazarus came out of his tomb. John Hegarty came out of his tomb. You and I come out of our tomb. But we're still tangled up in our grave wrappings. Stuff from our old life still clings to us. We're not free. We need to be unbound and inbreathed with the Spirit of God.

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord, God, thou knowest." Again 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; Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon 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 was commanded, and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was not breath in them.

At God's command, Ezekiel spoke to the bones. With great noise they came together, and in a mystery, were quickly formed into human bodies. But their eyes were shut. They were not breathing.

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the Spirit, prophecy, son of man, and say to the Spirit, 'Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O Spirit, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the Spirit came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Ezekiel 37

"Unbind him, and let him go!"

"Spirit of God, breathe on these slain that they may live!"

But what happens to Lazarus, if he never gets freed from his grave wrappings? What happens to those corpses, if Ezekiel never gets around to prophesying to the Spirit to fill them with the breath of God? Then the job is only half-done.

There are millions of professing Christians walking the earth right now who are still tangled in their grave wrappings. They're half-done. They're not dry bones any more, but they're asleep. Or worse: they aren't even breathing the breath of God.

The world is in turmoil. Nations are in upheaval. Imagine what would happen on this earth, imagine what would happen in your home town, if all these half-baked Christians suddenly threw off their grave wrappings and began breathing the breath of God!

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit which dwells in you.

Romans 8

Imagine what would happen if the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead would visit our assembly with such power that all our grave wrappings would fall away, and we would be fully alive and free in God!

It's happening in a thousand places across this earth even now. There is a stirring and a shaking, and the dry bones are coming together. The half-alive corpses are being filled with breath. Lazarus is shaking off his grave wrappings.

Could it be that one of the places where these things are happening is in our fellowship? Why not? Surely if we're truly gathered in the name of our Lord Jesus, the Spirit is among us to give life to these mortal

bodiesâ€¦helping us to get free from our grave clothes! Why else does the Spirit come among us but to raise us to life and set us free!

But pay attention to how this works. Those dry bones didn't raise themselves. God did it --- through the spoken word. Lazarus didn't raise himself or free himself from those grave wrappings. God did it through the spoken word.

When we talk about the Spirit giving life to these mortal bodies, we're not talking about a feeling. Or an emotion. We're talking about a life-giving word. The Spirit of God that gives life to these mortal bodies comes to us, not as a "feeling." Not as an "emotion." But as a Spoken Word!

Lazarus, come out!
Unbind him and let him go!
O dry bones hear the word of the Lord!
Spirit of God, breathe on these slain that they may live!

And the source of that spoken word is always the same: the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. He IS the Word of God. Alive among us as a life-giving Word. Listen to him:

It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to youâ€¦the words that I now speak to youâ€¦they are Spirit and they are life.

John 6

By speaking to us, the Master brings us to life. He sets us free from our grave wrappings. It all happens the moment we respond. And how do we respond? Simple: we make ourselves useful! Useful, not to our egos but to him!

After John Hegarty did that painting of himself emerging from his grave wrappings, his time of withdrawal came to an end. He was now under a call. It was time for him to make himself useful. And that's exactly what he did. John began to serve, quietly and without fanfare. To this day he is there for people who are still dead in their tombs, or tangled up in their grave wrappings. He is there with power to help those who listen and respond.

Once you're alive, you have the power to bring others to life.

Once you're free, you have the authority to set others free.

So make yourself useful!

Be there for the people he sends your way. You'll know who they are.

And when the Spirit makes you aware of someone he wants you to serve, don't spend three weeks stewing about it. Do it!

There is not a person reading these words who won't be given half a dozen opportunities to be useful for the Kingdom before seven days have passed.

A healing word.
A life-giving touch.
A prayer that brings heaven down into someone's life.
A sharing.
A helping hand.

Why else do you think we come together week-by-week in the name of the Lord Jesus, but to be raised to life anew and set free from those wrappings once more? But that's not the end of it! Now the Master sends us out into the world to be useful for him.

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

We aren't volunteers any more.

We are called.

ALIVE, FREE, AND USEFUL

We are anointed. To do in the Lord's name the very things he did for us:

To prophesy to those dry bones out there.

To set them free by the word of the Lord who lives in us.

What's the point of being alive and free, if we aren't useful?