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Archaeology expedition creates hope of God's plan for all of us

Bill Tammeus | May. 16, 2012 A small c catholic

TEL MARESHA, Israel -- The underground cave in which we are digging for archeological treasures here is domed with rock, cool and a bit damp.

Our Jewish-Christian study tour group has stopped at Bet Guvrin-Maresha National Park [1] in the Judean lowlands to get a sense of the astonishing layers of history in the Holy Land. And the experts who oversee this ongoing archeological dig are letting us do some real digging.

Using small claw-like tools, we churn up soil that has remained untouched by human hands for at least 2,000 years. As we do so, we watch for pieces of pottery, jewelry or anything else that seems not to be chalky rock or simply soil. The burden of not losing history seems palpable.

I soon find a shard of pottery a couple of inches across, and I put it into one of the "save" buckets. Soon, one of the women in our group begins to unearth what turns out to be a large pot that could hold several gallons of liquid. It's quite an amazing find for an amateur, and the professionals helping us are thrilled.

Perhaps this pot was used at the very time Jesus walked the earth. Experts later will date it and figure out its importance.

But what especially strikes me as I rake carefully through the soil is this: Although we may be resurrecting ancient artifacts used by real people, it's way beyond our power to resurrect the people themselves, save in our imaginations.

Perhaps 2,000 years from now, pilgrims seeking to understand life in America in the 21st century will be on their knees digging through ancient landfills, finding our plastic picnic forks, our dead computer keyboards, our cheap costume jewelry. And they will wonder what sort of people would have chosen to use -- then discard -- such stuff.

But they will not be able to bring us back to life. The atoms that make us up -- which, though within us, are older than we are -- will have scattered across the cosmos to form something or someone else.

And yet, somehow, there is something reassuring about finding the atoms that make up 2,000-year-old pottery shards, something that says that in God's economy, matter matters.

Indeed, the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body [2] affirms that very truth, though in a way, that defies complete explanation. The doctrine differs markedly from the old Greek idea of the immortal soul, which is not at all a Christian notion.

Christianity does not propose an evacuation theology that has our soul escaping our dead body. Rather, it suggests that God intends to redeem our whole person (which is what "body" means here) -- indeed, redeem the whole of creation, not just disembodied souls.

As I say, and as the apostle Paul says, this is a mystery, finally. But we comfort ourselves with the understanding that what God created and called good, God does not intend to waste.

Somehow I imagine that God will enjoy working on the reclamation project we call salvation, just as I and my traveling companions have enjoyed clawing and brushing through one of the many underground caves here to reclaim what has been lost since at least King Herod's time.

We have filled dozens of buckets with what seems like nothing but soil, but even these containers must be checked. So we form a bucket brigade to haul them up to the surface, and there we run the contents through sifters, all the while looking for important things we might have missed underground.

And, in fact, in the sifting process, we find more pottery pieces as well as what one of the professionals here describes as a counterweight used for various purposes long ago.

It's been a good day reconstructing a bit of history, and it has deepened my awe at the resurrection work God intends to do for the shards that we ourselves will become.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [3] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [4]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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