Homily for 5th Lent 2014
April 6, 2014
Readings: Ez. 37.12-14, Ps. 130, Rom. 8.8-11, Jn. 11.1-45
Places: St. Peter’s, Lewiston; and Stella Niagara
Theme: Distinguishing between restored life and risen life

A few years ago, many people read the #1 bestselling book called Heaven is for Real. The storyline came from a four-year old boy who needed emergency surgery for a burst appendix. After the successful operation, the boy told his parents what he had seen: he had what professionals call a temporary out-of-the-body experience. The boy could look down and see the doctor operating. This four-year old boy could see his father sitting down and praying. This book has been made into a movie which will be released ten days from now. Many books have been written about out-of-the-body experiences. Hundreds of people have written their stories. The boy added some marvelous details. He writes that he died, went to heaven, sat on Jesus’ lap, angels were singing to him, and he met and described perfectly two relatives whom he never met: his great-grandfather and an older sister whom his mother had miscarried and had never spoken about to the boy. Is it true? Dozens of books, hundreds of stories, and as a priest I have listened face-to-face to these and other marvelous spiritual stories. Do I believe this story? As a man of natural skepticism and critical thinking, I reply, “Yes, I believe it.” The spiritual world, i.e., the world of spirits, is alive and well.

In today’s first and third readings we hear of two life-after-life stories. The prophet Ezekiel promises that God will bring the people of Israel back to life. In the gospel, John reports that Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. And in two weeks, we will celebrate the great feast of Easter wherein we rejoice in that Jesus has come back to life. In this homily, I’d like to offer for your consideration an important distinction between “restored life” and “risen life”.

Restored life, or life-after-life, whereby life is restored to a dead person is awesome. Awesome means that this event fills people with wonderment. The Old Testament recounts two instances of individual restoration, one performed by Elijah, and another by Elisha, and the collective restoration of the country of Israel promised by God to the prophet Ezekiel. The New Testament reports four instances of restored life: Jesus’ friend Lazarus, the son of the widow of Nain, Jairus’ daughter, and the “young lad” Eutychus at Troas who had fallen asleep during St. Paul’s preaching, fell from a third-story window sill, and died. These four instances represent restored life.

The concept of resurrection appears for the first time in the Old Testament very late in history. The idea appears first around 165 BC in the Book of Daniel and again around 135 BC in the Book of the Maccabees. This initial concept of resurrection presents a rather amorphous and undefined eternal life.

In the New Testament, Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection many times: Matthew reports these predictions four times; Mark, three times; and Luke, twice. But the apostles did not “get it.” Even after the resurrection, when Jesus made a dozen appearances including four to the apostles, they did not “get it.” It is interesting who did get it: women. The three Synoptic Gospels report that women first
came upon the empty tomb. Someone informed them that Jesus was not present in the tomb: different Synoptics have different speakers: an angel, a gardener, a young man. Then Jesus himself appeared to the women, and the women ran to and reported this information to the disciples. John’s gospel instructs us that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, and that she recognized him. Finally, after fifty days, on the feast of Pentecost, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the apostles grasped the reality and significance of the resurrection. When it became necessary to replace Judas as the 12th apostle, the criterion included someone who had seen the risen Lord. And you’ll remember that Paul had seen the risen Lord when he was knocked off his high horse on the road to Damascus (AA 9.4, 1 Cor. 15.8).

For fifty days, Jesus remained on earth: teaching, eating with his glorified body, touching and being touched by others. Then he returned to his Father in heaven. Heaven, the Church teaches, is a spiritual state of being; it is not a physical place. Countless major civilizations, however, look “up” to heaven. Even Jesus ascended, and Mary was assumed into heaven. Theologically from the Scriptures, Tradition, and Teaching Office of the Church, heaven is a state of fullness of salvation, of complete beatitude/happiness, and gathering the community of humankind into the definitive Body of Christ. I trust that my mother and dad in their glorified bodies are in heaven. Personally, I imagine my mom sitting in quiet corner with a couple of friends where she sits reading a book! My dad, who loved a party, is probably with one hand greeting everybody, and with his other hand, holding a cold beer! Heaven is a spiritual state of being where no sorrow exists: simply praising God, communing with each other, and praying for those who remain on earth.

Getting back to our original distinction. Restored life is marvelous! Risen life is even more marvelous! Heaven is for real. See you there! And remind our family members and friends to be here on Easter Sunday, when we Christians celebrate the most important day of the year, and the most important day of our lives, when Jesus rose from death to eternal life.