

As good as dead: Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

by [Felipe N. Martinez](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

Aron Ralston knew he would die before the next morning's sunrise. Five days earlier he'd been walking a trail in a narrow desert canyon in Utah and had climbed down from a large chockstone along his route. A chockstone is a huge boulder that's wedged between other stones or canyon walls. This one may have been there for hundreds of years, but when Ralston came down, he somehow loosened the boulder, and it fell on him. When it stopped, the stone was wedged against both canyon walls, and his right wrist was between one of those walls and the boulder.

For five days, this experienced climber tried a thousand plans and a thousand variations on a plan to get himself free using the climbing equipment he had brought along. Ralston even considered amputating his arm, but his only available knife was not sharp enough. He had water and food for only a daylong hike, so he tried to ration it. As his struggle continued and the hours passed, Ralston reached into his backpack to get his video camera, and for several days he recorded his thoughts, speaking into the camera and addressing himself to all his loved ones in a farewell. Ralston figured that someone would eventually come across his body and deliver the tape to his family. As the fifth evening of his ordeal approached, he felt certain he would die that night, probably of hypothermia. With his knife he etched a date on the canyon wall to complete an epitaph he had been writing over the past few days:

RIP
OCT 75
ARON
APR 03

To his surprise, however, he survived the night, and in the morning a new idea came to him—a divine revelation, he felt. He understood what he had to do to cut off his arm. He knew his knife could never cut through his bones, but realized that if he twisted his body enough, the boulder and the canyon wall would function as a vise grip until his forearm bones snapped. After that, he could cut the remaining muscle and nerves. He succeeded. He was able to amputate his arm, went looking for help and encountered the search party that was looking for him.

When a National Public Radio interviewer asked Ralston about his decision, he replied:

The moment when I figured out how I could get free, it was the best idea and the most beautiful experience I will ever have in my life. . . . It was all euphoria and not a bit of horror. It was having my life back after being dead.

The scriptures are rich with stories of new or renewed life. In the passages for this Sunday, we encounter several people who were “as good as dead”—one was dead—but with whom God was not yet finished. There is old Abraham, the patriarch whose promised line of descendants had not materialized. There is the woman with the hemorrhage, whose life with an illness was becoming more illness than life. Finally, there is the synagogue leader’s daughter, who had died and was being mourned by her family. But all three—Abraham, the unnamed woman and the synagogue leader—possessed a living faith and sensed that God would perform a sign of new life for them. God heard their prayers and gifted them with life, so that faithful Abraham and Sarah received their firstborn, the daring woman reached out to touch Jesus’ robe, and the hopeful synagogue leader brought Jesus to his daughter so Jesus could give her life again. The outward foolishness of the pleas by these faithful men and women had brought ridiculing laughter from the crowd, but when new life sprang up where death or loss had once claimed victory, the reaction turned to awe.

There are times when we come to believe that we are as good as dead. There may even be people around us laughing at our wishful thinking that new life could still spring up. The moment of grace comes when the Spirit stirs within us, revealing new options. The Spirit gives us the peace to withstand the pain, loss and ridicule we will encounter on the way to discovering new life after being as good as dead.

When I was a young child growing up in Mexico, my family experienced a crushing financial blow. My parents had sold our house because they were building a new house in a middle-class neighborhood in Monterrey, but the architect and contractor ran off with my parents’ life savings. My family could not stay in our old house because the new owners needed to move in, and our new house was unfinished and at risk of being foreclosed on by the bank. Displaying a resilient and daring faith, my parents decided to move our family into the new house even though it did not have

doors, windows or flooring. Our neighbors must have thought we were squatters commandeering an abandoned house. After years in court, although they were not able to recover their money, my parents were allowed to keep the unfinished house. It was not the victory they'd prayed for, but it was the kind of miracle for which they'd hoped.

The stories of the synagogue leader, the healed woman and the ancient patriarch teach us about daring to hold God accountable for promises God has made to care for God's people. The answer to their prayers did not turn back the clock to happier days, but moved these people forward into healing. Their stories of new life touch us deeply and challenge us to pray for discernment, so we may know that the feeling of being "as good as dead" is not the end of the story.