

5th Sunday in Lent A 26 March 2023
John 11:1-45 and Ezekiel 37:1-14
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“Lazarus is dead,” Jesus tells the disciples. “Mortal, can these bones live again?” God asks Ezekiel. Let’s pray: ...

I can imagine the questions, doubts, and fears that must be running through the hearts and minds of Mary, Martha, and the disciples. They’re the same kinds of things that affect my heart and mind as the broadcast news continues to churn out seemingly ever-increasing tragedies, global instability, deaths, and funerals that come way too soon. These questions are raised whenever life is interrupted and changed in ways we don’t want.

The ultimate question, the question of all questions, is the one God asks Ezekiel. “Mortal, can these bones live again?” That’s what we really want to know. Don’t we? There’s no simple yes or no and it’s a question we ask over and over and over.

My experience is that unanswered questions tend to leave us disappointed; disappointed in life itself, in ourselves, in others, or sometimes, even in God. Disappointment soon gives way to doubt, and doubt to fear. That’s how we find Mary and Martha in today’s gospel. Disappointed, uncertain, fearful - “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Even the crowd of people who follow Mary express their fragility - “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

And we must remember that God himself relates to us in this way. “Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still. Therefore My gut growls/heart yearns/innards roar for him” (Jeremiah 31:20 [my translation from the Hebrew]).

Think of Jesus. “He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” [:33] and “began to weep” [:35] at the death of Lazarus. He was disappointed with Peter’s drawn sword and violence, Judas’ betrayal, the disciples sleeping in

the garden, the way his Father's house had been turned into a den of robbers, his disciples arguing about who was the greatest, the disciples' misunderstanding of who he is, the world's refusal to receive him, suffered horrendous punishment and finally, was crucified.

Everyone experiences this. Something terrible happens, and the uneasiness you feel in your gut turns to fear that this terrible something has the final say. Life seems constricted; hope stifled. No possibility is worthy of consideration. The hope of a new dawn fades as sunset and endless night sets in.

These experiences are the background for the spooky, memorable, fascinating stories of the valley of dry bones, those long dead, and Lazarus, whom are brought back to life, resuscitated by the spirit, the breath of God.

As Ezekiel gazes out on the valley of dry bones, he thinks of his people who've been driven into exile. Their connection with the land God gave them has been severed. They may know who they belonged to back in the good old days, but now they're not sure whose they are, living as aliens in a strange land hundreds of miles from the only home they've ever known.

Exile feels a lot like death for them as a people. Their spirits are as dry and bare as the bones lying in the valley. It's at the bottom of Ezekiel's deep despair that the Lord grabs him, takes him to the valley, and shows him dry bones that get up and dance, an entire people lifted up and restored to life.

The message for Ezekiel and those to whom he prophesies is clear: exile isn't the end. The Lord brings his people back even from the bone yard of exile. Death doesn't have the final say, it's just a station stop on the way to Paradise.

And so, it happens. God's people make it through the Babylonian exile. After seventy years, the exile is over, and they return home, walking tall and filled with joy. They've not merely survived, they've returned to their land stronger, wiser, and more deeply committed to the Lord.

This can also happen with a family. Hope is stifled when something terrible occurs to a family in the village of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem.

Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha has died. He's left his sisters behind. The loss isn't only a personal grief and an emotional burden. Mary and Martha are pushed into the dangerous, marginal territory of society as women without men. Their village doesn't know what to do with them. They risk becoming surplus people.

So, the death is not only of Lazarus. It feels also like death for Martha and Mary. They see no future worth considering. They believe in a final resurrection, but eternity is beyond any discernible horizon. What confronts these women is a series of weary days through which they must plod. A dreadful, personal exile.

And to add weight to woe, their friend Jesus, the miracle-working rabbi, doesn't get there until Lazarus has been dead for four days, and is buried in a tomb with a large stone blocking the entrance. Imagine the heartbreak when Martha greets Jesus with these words: "Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus and Martha talk about resurrection. Martha sees it in the future, something that will happen just before the full-time whistle [or trumpet as it were] is blown. Jesus sees resurrection as a present reality, something here and now. He identifies himself as the resurrection Martha anticipates, the life that she needs as much as her brother Lazarus does.

But Jesus isn't content with just talking. He calls Lazarus out of the tomb to continue his life on earth. By doing this, he also frees Martha and Mary from a marginal, stilted/lonely existence. Jesus removes the shroud of death from that household in Bethany.

But, what's the use? Israel returns from exile, yet their history since has been marked by numerous instances of loss and disgrace. Lazarus leaves the tomb, and becomes a walking miracle in his village, yet, dies again after some years. This time, the stone blocking his tomb remains in place.

These stories of the valley of dry bones and the family in Bethany, are two reminders of the myriad ways by which divine power fights against the terrors we feel in our gut, ever having the last word.

But more than that, the Bethany family and valley of dry bones also point ahead to the greatest story of all. This story will unfold between Good Friday and Easter Sunday; telling of how something terrible did happen.

From a Friday afternoon until the following Sunday at dawn, a few human hearts believe that this something terrible has had the last word, that sunset and endless night await. Their experience incorporates the valley of dry bones, Bethany, and even more than that. What lifts them from grief and death is divine power at work in a way that can never be reversed, divine power that opens the door permanently to a sunrise beyond our comprehension.

So, three stories bless our lives today. The first, Ezekiel dry bones regenerated into a people. The second, Lazarus resurrected to re-join his sisters. The third will be told over Holy Week. We'll also encounter this story of death and resurrection later in the service, when the Body is broken and the Blood is poured out for us, for angels, for archangels, and for all the company of heaven.

When life is ruthlessly constricted, when hope is stifled, when it appears that death has the last word, we see only sunset and endless night. When we find ourselves in Bethany's house of grief, or down in the valley among the dry bones, then we must look past the terrible something and ache for God to intervene. The one who acted powerfully in the stories of Ezekiel and Lazarus and above all in the story of Jesus is both willing and able to act in our stories as well.

No bones are too dry; no grief too deep; no tombstone too heavy to move. God can resurrect an executed man! God can revive a heartbroken family! God can rehydrate and regenerate a dry bones community! And God always has the last word, and that Word has the name above all names - Jesus, the beginning and the end, the first-born of many from the dead. "Mortal, can these bones live again?" The answer to that question echoes from the deepest, darkest tomb to the driest expanse of lifeless bones. Yes they can! Yes they do! Yes they will! Through the same Jesus, yesterday, today, forever. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.