

5 Lent Ezekiel 37:1-14 John 11:1-45
Christ and Grace March 29, 2020
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Here we are on this Fifth Sunday in Lent, knowing by the calendar and by the new growth bursting forth outside that Holy Week and Easter are almost here. But we are all sheltering in place, or sheltering in grace as I heard someone say this week. It doesn't feel like Lent at all, does it? In fact, it seems like we are missing it altogether. It feels like we are dead in a tomb and waiting for a resurrection; a resurrection we are half afraid won't come.

The readings today tell us of resurrection, of bringing new life out of what was presumed to be dead. In our reading from Ezekiel, the prophet is taken to the valley of dry bones, and it's clear that this image represents the crisis of 587 BCE in Jerusalem. When the Babylonians swept in and conquered Judah they forced the people into exile; they destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple, the place where God dwelled. The Babylonian siege was a time of devastation and despair – it was a national disaster and a crisis of faith. God's people had lost the land promised to their ancestors, their king had been taken captive, and the temple, where the Lord dwelled, where God's glory was known, lay in ruins. They could no longer worship there.

The people in exile had lost everything. They were living in a strange land, and had to learn to worship away from the temple with spiritual practices that were different from their normal worship. In this place of loss and grief, the prophet Ezekiel is visited by the spirit of God and is taken to a valley of dry bones.

The vision Ezekiel experiences is a metaphor for Israel's rebirth after the exile and shows him that God is not confined to the Jerusalem temple, but can come and go in such a way that God can be present even among exiles in a foreign land. The vision makes clear to Ezekiel that the presence and life-giving power of God is in the community, among the people, wherever they may be. This was a much-needed word of hope for a community grieving so much; a community who believed they were dead, who cried out, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

Perhaps Ezekiel has a word for us today. We cannot worship together in our church building, our land is in a crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and all the ways we connected to God and to one another at church have been suspended. But the vision Ezekiel got from God, if it is also for us, and I believe it is, is that we are not without hope. We are a community in exile, but we are not dead. Our spiritual practices have changed but we are not cut off completely, though we might, like the exiles of Judah, feel disconnected. We might feel as if there is no hope as we face challenges for which there seem to be no good answers. Can these bones live? How can the Spirit blow new life into us?

In our Gospel reading we have another resurrection story. Jesus doesn't get to Bethany fast enough to heal Lazarus. Martha and Mary both begin their interactions with Jesus by sharing their loss of hope in the midst of their sadness, even accusing Jesus saying, "Lord if you had

been here, my brother would not have died.” This is raw disappointment, loss, and grief, and it’s something that every single one of us has experienced at some time in our lives. It’s something we are all experiencing right now, in various way, as this virus affects our lives, changes our plans, and overturns all our hoped for activities at church, work, school, and even at home. All this quarantine time together can get pretty crunchy!

When Jesus says that Lazarus will be raised, Martha assumes he is speaking about the promised resurrection at the end of time and she says, “Yes, Lord, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day.” But Jesus means something more, something immediate, revealing that the life he offers is not merely a promise for the future but something that makes a difference here and now.

And Lazarus, who is most certainly dead, returns to life when Jesus commands “Lazarus, come out!” But notice that Jesus does not stop there. After commanding Lazarus to come out of the tomb, Jesus then turns and issues a command to the waiting crowd as well: “unbind him and let him go.” In other words, the community is commanded to participate in God’s action, to bring it to completion. It is the experience of new life in community right now that strengthens our faith in eternal life. Jesus invites the community to get involved, to play a part in seeing this miracle move forward, because when the community participates, God’s command is brought to beautiful completion.

We are being called to bear witness to God’s actions in our lives right now and to be changed by what we experience. God is with us and is transforming us even now, in ways that will become visible as we do the work of unbinding in community. I’ve witnessed this unbinding in the Christ and Grace community and in the world - there have been teacher parades in Hanover and other school districts to bring joy to the students, musicians giving free concerts from their living rooms, parishioners giving rides to medical appointments, calling to check on those who live alone, shopping for and delivering groceries and unexpected surprises. It’s our small, faithful actions that reveal new life in this world. Resurrection is happening even now, all around us, if we will take time to look around, see what fears and doubts and losses and griefs need unbinding, and then do small things to help.

While our Holy Week and Easter will be very different this year, some of us are working on resources for different spiritual practices to help us all journey with Christ to the cross, and then celebrate the Resurrection on Easter Day. Because Easter happens, even in a pandemic. The transformation of the valley of dry bones, the raising of Lazarus, and the life-giving actions we are part of in this community affirm for us that new life is all around us if we will look for it, and help unbind one another to experience it.

As we approach the end of Lent, I encourage you to look around for the possibility of new life. Remember that sometimes, oftentimes, the new life will not look like the old life. And when you notice a possibility, even in a field of dry bones or in a tomb that seems sealed, allow the Spirit to blow through with new life, allow Jesus to speak new life to you. And trust that God is

inviting us to experience the power of the resurrection in our lives, new life, not only in the future, but here and now. Amen.