

FIRST LESSON: Ezekiel 37:1-14
SECOND LESSON: John 11:1-45
March 26, 2023
FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

“Dry Bones No More”
Sermon ©Lisa C. Farrell

A new Pastor in a small town spent the first four days making personal visits to each of the members, inviting them to come to his first services. The following Sunday the church was all but empty. Accordingly, the Pastor placed a notice in the local newspapers stating that because the church was dead, it was everyone's duty to give it a decent Christian burial. The notice stated that the funeral would be held the following Sunday afternoon. A large crowd of the morbidly curious turned out for the “funeral.” In front of the pulpit, they saw a closed coffin, covered in flowers. After the Pastor delivered the eulogy, he opened the coffin and invited the congregation to come forward and pay their final respects to their dead church. Filled with curiosity as to what would represent the corpse of a “dead church,” all the people eagerly lined up to look in the coffin. Each “mourner” that peered into the coffin quickly turned away, however, with a guilty expression. In the coffin, tilted at just the right angle, was a large mirror. Oh snap!

Valleys are normally peaceful places, but when the Lord brought Ezekiel to a valley to give him a vision, it was not a peaceful vision. It concerned the death of a people, of a congregation, of a calling. This was a vision. An army did not literally arise out of dry bones. There’s no zombie apocalypse going on here. God was making a point.

The valley Ezekiel saw was full of bones. In times of war a valley was not a good place to be. It was a trap. Soldiers in a valley were sitting ducks if there were enemies above them. This was clearly the site of a great military defeat, probably against Nebuchadnezzar. And the defeat was so total, that no one had even buried the dead. This was against all accepted Jewish practice. Even criminals were to be buried. But there was no one left to bury these dead. They lay where they died, and only their bones remained.

These people had been dead for a very long time. We know because the bones were dry and the remains scattered. Wild animals and weather had done their worst. What was left were dry bones strewn across the landscape—a bleak picture of total loss. God asked Ezekiel if these bones could live. Of course, the obvious answer was no. There are some precedents in the Old Testament for restoring life, but in all of those cases the death was recent. No one had ever brought life back from dry bones. But with God doing the asking, Ezekiel knew anything was possible, so he answered, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

God told Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones, to tell them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! . . . I will make breath enter you, and you will come

to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”

Ezekiel did what God commanded. He prophesied over a pile of bones, and stood in amazement as a great rattling filled the air, bone joining bone, each separated part returning to the body it once belonged to. Tendons and muscles followed, and finally skin. Soon the bodies were complete. They looked human again, but they were still inert. Finally, Ezekiel prophesied the breath of God into them, and they came alive. The breath or the *spirit* of the Lord filled them. A great army stood where dry bones once lay.

With the vision complete, God explained the meaning to Ezekiel. The bones are the people of Israel. The people feel as if they are dried up. All hope is gone. The future is lost. They feel cut off. But the Sovereign Lord says, *no, this is not the end*. “My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel . . . I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land.” God promises to restore life. Even when things seem beyond hope, God has a purpose and God has a plan.

The vision of dry bones rising to life is powerful. The story of the raising of Lazarus is equally dramatic, but in this case we have a true story, not a vision. Lazarus, the dear friend of Jesus and brother to Martha and Mary, got sick and died. In a time before antibiotics and hospitals, people died of things easily cured now. Jesus received word that Lazarus was ill, but he did not go immediately. It even appears as if he deliberately did not go right away. By the time Jesus and the disciples arrived Lazarus had been dead for four days. According to common understanding the spirit of the person left after the third day. By waiting till the fourth day, it was clear to all concerned that Lazarus was not in a coma. Lazarus was well and truly dead. Just as dry bones were beyond hope, after four days hope was gone. They had waited until his body had begun to show clear signs of death, and then sealed the tomb.

When Jesus arrived, Martha went out to meet him. Mary did not. She stayed home. Was she too angry with Jesus for not coming right away? Too overcome with grief? We don’t know. But Martha, ever the one to just get up and do the right thing did come out. She spoke frankly to Jesus saying, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But she added, “But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus told Martha that her brother would rise again, which she quite logically took to be a reference to the resurrection of the dead at the last day. But Jesus was not speaking of the end times. He said, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Martha replied with the strongest confession of faith in scripture. “Yes, Lord,” she said, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” Martha, who we normally remember for being chided about complaining when her sister shirked in order to sit at Jesus’ feet, had more faith than Peter.

Martha went back to the house to get Mary. Mary then got up and went

to meet Jesus. Those who had been in the house comforting her came along, assuming she was going to the tomb. Mary fell at Jesus' feet and in grief and anguish echoed the words of her sister, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus asked where Lazarus was laid, and at his tomb we are given the shortest verse in the bible. "Jesus wept."

Jesus knew that Lazarus had died. He knew that he intended to raise Lazarus from the dead. But he still responded to Mary's overwhelming grief. He shared it. He didn't distance himself. When the people there saw Jesus' compassion, they were both moved by it and critical, questioning why Jesus could not have prevented Lazarus' death.

The tomb in which Lazarus was laid would have been typical of the time: a simple cave with a ledge or two inside. A flat round stone was rolled into place between two grooves. Jesus asked that the stone be rolled away, and was warned by Martha that it had been four days. By this time the smell would be quite bad. But Jesus was persistent, and they rolled away the stone. Then he offered a prayer of thanks to God before calling out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And he did.

There's no mention of screaming but I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if someone had. We don't expect dead people wrapped in strips of linen to come walking out. (Just think, folks, in one sermon we've gone from zombies to mummies.) But Jesus said, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Evidently someone, probably Martha, had the courage to do so. They did not find a decomposing monster underneath. They found Lazarus, human, sound of body, and no doubt confused.

Jesus raised someone from the dead. We would think that should have been the end of all argument. Clearly this man is the Messiah. Only the Messiah could do such a thing! But instead, it was the beginning of an even deeper plot to get rid of Jesus. The leaders did not rejoice. They were furious. They even plotted to kill Lazarus, to eliminate this problem once and for all.

God has the power to raise the dead. Dead individuals, dead communities, even dead churches. We are far from dead, but it's easy to look at a church the size of Penn Wynne and get discouraged. Where we need to keep our focus is on God. Dry bones live when filled with the Spirit of God. Small churches live when filled with the Spirit of God. Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, but he knew that he could because of the faith of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. We have survived congregational losses through death, through people moving away, through leaving because Vicki and I married. We have survived Covid and the year everything shut down, and at the same time enormous damage to the building caused by Hurricane Isaias, damage that cost us a large chunk of our endowment. But God is bringing new life. A congregation is like a river. You never step into the same river twice. And the waters of the Spirit are flowing here, bringing in a new faithful generation. Where there is faith and faithfulness, there is resurrection. Amen.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

37 The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. **2** He led me back

and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. **3** He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

4 Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!’ **5** This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. **6** I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. **8** I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

9 Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” **10** So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

11 Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’” **12** Therefore prophecy and say to them: “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. **13** Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. **14** I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.”

John 11:1-45

11 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. **2** (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) **3** So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” **5** Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. **6** So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, **7** and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

8 “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?”

9 Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. **10** It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”

11 After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

12 His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” **13** Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

14 So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, **15** and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

16 Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. **18** Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, **19** and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

21 “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22** But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

24 Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26** and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

27 “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

28 After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” **29** When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. **30** Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. **31** When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. **34** “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

35 Jesus wept.

36 Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

37 But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. **39** “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

40 Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.