

FIRST LESSON: Ezekiel 37:1-14

SECOND LESSON: John 11:1-45

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FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

During the global Coronavirus outbreak—delivered online

“Death Defeated”

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The zombie apocalypse is not something we expect to find in scripture, but Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones coming to life is pretty close. If it actually happened we would all run. But we need to understand the timing and the culture to figure out what it really means. This vision came to Ezekiel during a time known as the Babylonian Exile. Babylon had conquered Israel, deporting the king and political leaders. Ezekiel was among them. (2 Kings 24: 10-16) But that wasn’t the end of it, because ten years later Jerusalem rebelled again and this time the entire city and temple were destroyed and a second larger wave of deportation happened.

Things looked grim. It looked like the nation and its entire way of life was over. 150 years earlier the northern region of Judah had been conquered, many of its people deported and the people virtually disappeared, assimilated into the nations in which they found themselves. Now the southern region of Israel, too, was facing extermination.

This was a crisis. It was an existential crisis of survival, of identity, and of faith. Without Jerusalem and the Temple how could God’s people continue to exist? The Old Testament language of lament speaks of bones being dried up and wasting away. “My bones” is my identity, my deepest self. A valley of dry bones represents the hopelessness and destruction of a people. And as one commentator I read put it, “Nothing says ‘really, really dead’ like a pile of dry bones.”

The bones in this vision represent more than those who actually died during this disaster. They represent the living—those in captivity who have lost everything. The question God asked Ezekiel is, “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel wasn’t about to get trapped trying to figure out the right answer. He wisely answered, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

God told Ezekiel to prophesy life into the bones, and life came. The bones came together, then tendons, muscles and skin, but there was no breath. Ezekiel was told to prophesy again and they lived. God’s Spirit restored life. Despite everything, despite the exile, despite the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, there was life. There was a future. Israel had not been abandoned.

Dry bones represent the permanence of death in a profound way. In our New Testament reading the permanence and reality of death forms the very basis of our story. In the first century people believed that the spirit of a person

lingered for three days. By the 4th day, that person was gone, and by the time Jesus arrived it had been four days.

When Lazarus became sick his two sisters Mary and Martha sent for Jesus immediately, although they would have known that the chances of Jesus receiving the message before Lazarus died were slim. Jesus was only about fifteen miles away, but it was an especially difficult fifteen miles uphill through rocky terrain. These siblings were close to Jesus. He visited them in their home in Bethany many times. We are told that this is the same Mary who used her hair to anoint Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Given the closeness of the relationship, and the urgency of the situation what we discover next is both strange and shocking. John's gospel says, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, **he stayed where he was two more days . . .**" THAT makes absolutely no sense. He loves them so much he deliberately stayed where he was for two days? Who does that? And when he does tell his disciples that they are going back to Judea they try to persuade him not to, because people had been trying to kill him there.

It is very likely that Lazarus had already died by the time the message reached Jesus. There were no modern medical interventions, no antibiotics, no ventilators, no IVs, no ways of stabilizing blood pressure or lowering fever. But if Jesus had come right away and raised Lazarus from the dead, it would not have been recognized as such. People would have said that Lazarus had only been in a deep coma, that his spirit had not yet departed. By arriving four days after Lazarus died there was absolutely no doubt. Lazarus was dead. And when Jesus did tell the disciples that they were going to Judea he knew that Lazarus was dead. He even had to spell it out for his disciples in no uncertain terms.

While it was understood that there was no hope after four days, the official period of mourning is seven days. Many people had come to sit Shiva with Mary and Martha. When the sisters heard that Jesus was coming Martha went out to meet him but Mary stayed home. This was not a personal rejection of Jesus on Mary's part. One of them had to stay with the mourners.

When Martha met Jesus she said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Here's our dilemma. We don't have tone of voice. We don't have the emotion. We don't know what deeper meaning might have been behind Martha's words to Jesus. Was there reproach in her words, or despair? From what she said next, we know that there was some faith. She said, "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

When Jesus replied, "Your brother will rise again," Martha may have been disappointed. She responded that she knew he would rise in the resurrection at the last day. She didn't say that that wasn't really what she was asking for. But Jesus went on to challenge her further, saying, "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 then affirmed her belief in one of the strongest and most complete expressions of faith found in the gospels. "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

Martha returned to the house to get Mary and Mary got up quickly and went outside the village to meet Jesus. Those with her thought she had gone to the tomb, so they followed. Even more dramatically than her sister Mary fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Mary was sobbing. That's what the Greek word means. Greek, like English, uses different words to describe crying. Mary was completely and utterly beside herself. Jesus was deeply moved by her grief. He asked gently, "Where have you laid him?" "Come and see, Lord," the people replied. And Jesus wept. He didn't sob as Mary did. Instead tears silently streamed down his face. The Jews who were with the sisters took note of how much Jesus loved Lazarus, but some of them questioned how this man who could make a blind man see couldn't have kept Lazarus from dying.

The tomb was a cave with a large stone rolled across it. When they arrived, Jesus made an appalling request. He asked that the stone be rolled away. This would be the equivalent of telling the family of the deceased to get a shovel and dig up the grave. It was outrageous. Even Martha for all her faith objected. According to the NIV she said "But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." We're so ridiculously polite in our English translations. What she really said was "But Lord, by this time he stinks." This isn't just a "bad odor." This is the stench of death. But Jesus was insistent, and so they complied. Jesus looked to God in prayer, thanked God, and then he called Lazarus to come out.

The dead man came out. He was wrapped for burial with strips of linen and a cloth around his face. It must have been terrifying. Jesus told the people to take the grave clothes off of him and let him go. Someone, probably his sisters, had the courage to do this, and Lazarus was returned to them alive.

This miracle was a singular event in history. God used the sickness and death of Lazarus to demonstrate that Jesus had power over death, that he had the power to lay his life down and the power to take it back up again. Resurrection from the dead is not something anyone else can do.

Many of us are looking at our nation right now and wondering if there will be a resurrection. How we can survive this? We're not sure what we are more afraid of—a deadly virus or the complete economic collapse of our nation and the world of nations. But God is the God of life. Even out of death God brings new life. Right now we don't know what the future holds, **but we do know who holds the future.** We can turn to the same God who restored a nation that had been entirely destroyed and scattered. We can turn to the God who brought Lazarus back from the dead to demonstrate to us all that God has power over death. And we can turn to a God who has compassion on us, a God who weeps with us. God is not distant from us in our time of trouble. God is in every emergency room, every ICU, and with every frightened, lonely person who cannot leave their home. And God will guide us and bring us through this time stronger and wiser than we were before. We ask, "Can these bones live?" And God answers, "Yes." 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.