

Sermons at the
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 29, 2020 (5th Sunday in Lent, Year A)
Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-45

Our readings this morning hit REALLY close to home in a time such as THIS. They begin with death. And THAT is a subject we are hearing about WAY too often these days. The news about this pandemic gets more FRIGHTENING every day. In the United States, as of yesterday, more than 2,000 COVID-19 patients have died, and 500 of those were reported just YESTERDAY. In Spain, they had their deadliest day yet, 832 deaths in one day. And ITALY has had worse days than THAT. Around the globe, more than 30,000 people have died, and more than 200 countries, areas and territories have reported cases.

These are scary times. There is good REASON for you all to be staying at home right now, and WATCHING this on your computer or phone.

So today, pastors across the country are APPROACHING these scripture texts with fear and trembling. But should it come as any surprise to us that the Word of the Lord should speak so DIRECTLY to events happening in our world and emotions we're experiencing in our lives? No, this is WHY God's LIVING Word has INSPIRED us for THOUSANDS of years, because it CONTINUES to speak to us in NEW ways every day. So HEAR the Word of the Lord.

Ezekiel's VISION must have been a TERRIBLE sight: a valley of dry bones. EVERY WORD of that phrase means DEATH, doesn't it? We hear echoes of the valley of the SHADOW of death from the 23rd Psalm. The bones are a SYMBOL of death, and what's worse is that they're not even SKELETONS; they're SCATTERED bones, which makes them even FURTHER from life. And not only THAT – the bones are DRY, like they've been BAKED in the sun. Whenever they WERE alive, it was a LONG time ago. There was NO chance of EVER being brought BACK. They SAY, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost" (v. 11).

Lazarus hadn't been dead NEARLY so long, of course, but it was long ENOUGH. Long enough that he'd been wrapped and buried. Long enough that the tomb was sealed off with a stone. Long enough that the EVER-PARTICULAR Martha was concerned about the STENCH of decomposition. Long enough that his spirit, which the old superstition said HOVERED around the tomb for three days, was LONG GONE. He was DEAD, dead. There was NO CHANCE of resuscitation. There was no HOPE of him EVER coming back.

But these aren't just ANCIENT stories of nations and people who lived THOUSANDS of years ago; these are OUR stories too. In the MIDST of these times, how are we FEELING? What emotions are we EXPERIENCING right now? When we're honest, we feel fear, exhaustion, sadness or anger, anxiety, emptiness. There's this tremendous sense of HOPELESSNESS in the world today.

But as I said last week, this didn't just BEGIN a couple WEEKS ago. For SOME TIME now, people have been SEARCHING for something to BELIEVE in. They're looking for some MEANING in life, some REASON to go ON. The world we live in is LIKE the valley of dry bones: It's full of people who LIVE, but in TRUTH, SPIRITUALLY they feel like DRY BONES.

But it's not just out THERE. Who among US hasn't stood on the EDGE of losing hope? Who hasn't FACED a situation where there doesn't seem to be even the POSSIBILITY of recovery? What do you do when you lose your job? When you lose your home? How can you go ON when the only person you can remember EVER loving just DIED? What MEANING does life have when one of your children is CUT DOWN in the prime of their life? Who hasn't known the PAIN of LOSING HOPE? In the midst of our LOSS, hope lies ENTOMBED in endless grief. We are IN that valley with Ezekiel WAITING for the Word of the Lord. We are in that TOMB with LAZARUS WAITING for Jesus to say, "Lazarus, come out."

And Jesus will DO JUST THAT, but FIRST Jesus does something AMAZING. Maybe JUST as amazing as the miracle ITSELF. It might even PART of the miracle. What's so AMAZING is what Jesus does on the way THERE.

You know, Jesus WENT to Bethany FULLY INTENDING to RAISE Lazarus, BEFORE EITHER of his sisters came to him. He was ON his WAY. So, WHY STOP? Why not just GO to the tomb and DO it, do the THING he WENT there to do, do the MIRACLE? And why let BOTH sisters come to him? There had to be a REASON.

Listen to MARTHA: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." What do you think was her TONE of voice? Was it a statement of FAITH, RECITED like we do the creeds in worship? Or was it a COMPLAINT or a lament, like in the psalms? Or was it spoken with ANGER? If YOU were in her place, how would YOU have said it?

MARY says EXACTLY the SAME WORDS as Martha: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," but SHE says them while CRYING at Jesus' FEET. She doesn't say ANYTHING else. Mary JUST CRIES.

And Jesus STOPPED, and took the time to TALK with Martha and Mary. Jesus SPENT some TIME with BOTH of them. Why? Because THEY NEEDED him to. They needed to GRIEVE. They needed to EXPRESS how they felt, and they needed Jesus to BE there and HEAR them. They grieved in two VERY DIFFERENT ways, but Jesus was THERE for BOTH of them. He KNEW their grief would soon END, he knew WHY he was THERE, but he took the time ANYWAY, to give them the GIFT of HIMSELF.

And in doing so, he gave US a gift too – he showed us that it's OKAY to GRIEVE.

And Jesus is NEVER more HUMAN than he is RIGHT here. It says, "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her ALSO weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved," but that translation is too tame. The original Greek word has a DEEP, from the GUT, HEAVING kind of PAIN to it. JESUS was GRIEVING. He grieved like MARTHA and MARY grieved. He grieved like WE grieve. He CARED!

And then we find one of the shortest and most PROFOUND verses in all of Scripture: "Jesus wept." THINK about that for a moment. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, WEEPS, because his FRIEND has DIED. He doesn't look DOWN on those who grieve, like they should KNOW better; he WEEPS WITH them.

And it's those TEARS that CONNECT us with Jesus. A CHRIST can make the blind see. A CHRIST can make a lame man dance or feed thousands with a few loaves. A CHRIST can walk on water, turn water into wine, and make wine into the grace of God. But only TEARS can make the Christ into JESUS, into our SAVIOR. The TEARS make Jesus like US, and they ASSURE us that God UNDERSTANDS our PAIN, our grief, and our HUMANITY.

His tears reveal how WRONG it is for our loved ones to die prematurely. They SHOUT at the forces of evil and destruction, and CRY OUT for justice. They SCREAM AGAINST death. They SHOW us the we don't JUST have a Lord who suffers FOR us; we have a SAVIOR who suffers WITH us.

But of course, there's MORE to this story. Jesus is more POWERFUL than death. He has the power to GIVE life, EVEN to the DEAD. He TRUMPS death, DEFEATS it! The stone is rolled away and there's a RESURRECTION, a Mini-Easter, RIGHT here in Lent, a FORETASTE of the feast to come. Jesus ALWAYS has the last word, and it's a word of HOPE and PROMISE: "I am the resurrection and the life," he says. That's WHO GOD IS, and it's the BEDROCK of our faith. He says, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will NEVER die." PRAISE the Lord!

Our ONLY hope is GOD. God GIVES LIFE. No matter how LOW we've sunk, no matter how ALONE and EMPTY we feel, God offers us the HOPE of NEW life. The valley of dry bones CAN'T HOLD us. God NEVER abandons us. Even when we THINK it's HOPELESS, even when we FEEL SPIRITUALLY DEAD, there IS hope. There's ALWAYS hope.

But ... this IS LENT. Just a few verses AFTER our reading, we're reminded that THIS hope,

the hope of NEW life NOW and of ETERNAL life to come, was BOUGHT with a PRICE. Jesus paid DEARLY for it. There's a REASON why we READ this story in the season of Lent: Because of all the signs that Jesus DOES in the Gospel of John, this is the FINAL STRAW. THIS is the act that leads DIRECTLY to his DEATH. BECAUSE of this sign, the authorities decide that Jesus is too DANGEROUS and they plot to KILL him.

It's IRONIC that, by GIVING life to ANOTHER, Jesus will GIVE UP his OWN life. But that's what a SAVIOR DOES. And He MAKES that trade for EVERY SINGLE ONE of us. You and I ARE Lazarus. Our lives ARE the valley of dry bones. And Jesus came to put an END to it. Jesus RESTORES us to LIFE, by GIVING us HIS.

So, there you have it. We had our GLIMPSE of EASTER, but now we're headed back to the CROSS. And that's okay, because even in the MIDST of a valley of DRY BONES, we are a people of HOPE. And up THERE, up on that CROSS, THAT'S where hope LIVES. Amen.