

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
on March 29, 2020**

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

Our Gospel lesson today is the Raising of Lazarus. Jesus returns to Bethany, the village where Mary and Martha live with their brother. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has died and been buried in a tomb for four days. What strikes me today about this Gospel lesson is Jesus' assuredness, almost cold-hearted assuredness. From the time Jesus receives the news that Lazarus is ill to arriving in Bethany and greeting Martha, Lazarus' sister, Jesus is just so matter-of-fact. When he first hears that Lazarus is ill, Jesus tells the messenger, "This illness does not lead to death." When the disciples are concerned about travelling to Bethany, Jesus tells them, "Those who walk during the day do not stumble." When the disciples question the extent of Lazarus' illness, Jesus tells them, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." When he arrives in Bethany, Jesus tells Martha, "Your brother will rise again." So matter-of-fact. Almost, cold-hearted assuredness. Yet, when Jesus watches Lazarus' sister, Mary, kneel at his feet and weep, and he watches the Jews who have gathered around Mary weeping, he is "deeply moved." Jesus weeps...all divine, knowing Lazarus will be brought to life...all human, sharing our heartbreak. Jesus is empathy. Jesus is our closest friend who comforts us through our fears and anxieties and disappointments because he knows these emotions and he knows us uniquely and intimately. He is that friend who comforts you because you know he understands.

We're in a unique time in history. Of course, there is much we can learn from previous pandemics. Yet, this pandemic has particular characteristics and is occurring at a time when we are connected unlike ever before, mobility-wise and technology-wise. We all have so many

questions right now about our personal lives and our work lives, about the various communities and settings in which we interact. Changes are coming at us so rapidly, from social distancing to staying-at-home to interpreting mandates. And, every change leads us to ask our questions all over again. The Staff has been grappling with a long list of questions: how do we worship, how do we worship during Holy Week, how do we pastor, how do we do programming, how do we stay connected, how do we communicate, how do we send and post videos, how do we moderate on-line discussions, how do we best communicate with parishioners who do not use email, how do we prioritize all the resources that are coming at us on-line, how do we care for our greater community, how do we make decisions around staffing and salary and benefits? We don't have all the answers. None of us do. Because we don't know all the details on how this virus is spread, on how long this pandemic will last, on the waves of health and illness until a vaccine is approved and distributed. There just aren't enough modern examples to be sure of the answers.

So, what do we do? We practice community at its best, engaging in discussion, asking questions with open hearts, so that we might hear one another and make good decisions, even if only for a few days, when we need to ask the questions again. What do we do? We recognize that we are in this together, and so we are kind and patient with one another as we navigate the worry and anxiety and uncertainty. What do we do? We stay connected to one another as best we can through the phone, and mail, and internet. What do we do? We pray, for all who are ill, for all health care workers and first responders, for all in authority, for medical researchers, for those who work in essential businesses, for those who have lost their employment, for those who are lonely and afraid. We pray.

Our Old Testament lesson today is the story of the Valley of the Dry Bones from Ezekiel. Perhaps you are familiar with the Gospel song: "Ezekiel connected dem dry bones, I hear the

word of the Lord. Your back bone connected to your shoulder bone, your shoulder bone connected to your neck bone, your neck bone connected to your head bone, I hear the word of the Lord!” Upon the death of King Solomon in the year 930 BC, the house of Israel was divided between two kingdoms, the Northern and the Southern. Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel made up the Northern Kingdom. The remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin made up the Southern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 721 BC and the Southern Kingdom fell to the Babylonians in 587 BC. During the fall of the Southern Kingdom, the military elite and the cultural elite, including the prophet Ezekiel, were taken from their homeland and forced into exile in Babylon. This brief history lesson helps us understand these words from God proclaimed by the prophet Ezekiel: “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel...I am going to...bring you up from your graves...and bring you back to the land of Israel.” In other words, God will rescue the Israelites from exile and bring them home. And, in so doing, Ezekiel tells us, “...you shall know that I am the Lord.” There it is, there’s the invitation, there’s God’s desire. “You shall know that I am the Lord.” When we pray, when we turn toward God, we are rescued from our fear and anxiety and granted the peace to endure the challenges ahead of us.

Ezekiel prophesizes, “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” You shall live...the cornerstone of our faith...resurrection...connecting the bones...raising Lazarus from the dead. Uncertainty lies ahead...there will be more questions seeking answers. Now, more than ever, we grasp onto our faith and know that resurrection is inherent to our life together, resurrection is always on the horizon. There will be a new day. Jesus, resurrected, comforts us now, understanding us uniquely and intimately. We pray, sharing our fears and anxieties and disappointments, our hopes and desires. We live as community, leaning on one another, caring for one another, learning from one another. We remain grounded in our faith. We may not

know how, but we do know that new life will be the answer. Amen.