

John 11:1-45 and Ezekiel 37:1-14 (March 25, 2023)

Jesus postpones going to save one of his dearest friends, allowing his friend Lazarus to die, to be placed in the tomb, and doesn't arrive at his house until the fourth day after his death. His disciples don't want Jesus to even go to see his friend, they are afraid he will be killed. Jesus says he's going, so the disciples decide to go along with him claiming they will die along side him.

When he arrived at his friend's home, Lazarus' sister Martha comes away from the house to meet Jesus on the road, outside of the village of Bethany. She must have known where Jesus was staying when the messengers were sent to bring him to heal her brother. She must have known that Jesus delayed making the journey to their house. It would be difficult for her to understand why Jesus wouldn't have come sooner to save Lazarus' life. Jesus assures her that he is "the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die". He asks her if she believes him, and she says she knows who he is and she believes.

Martha then goes back to the house to get Mary, telling her Jesus has arrived. Mary and the people who were mourning with her go to see Jesus. Mary too accuses him of ignoring their plea for help. He shows his humanity and cries along with her, even though he knows what is going to happen next. The reason for his delay is to show his power is fully of God. Calling Lazarus' name, he orders him to come out of the grave, which he does. This act of giving life to a dead person causes many Jews to believe in Jesus, giving the Jewish authorities more reason to want to eliminate him.

Why wouldn't the hearts of the Jewish leaders also be turned toward Jesus? Perhaps it is fear of losing the tenuous authority they have with the Roman rulers who allow Judaism to be practiced, if it does not interfere with the Roman rule or cause any disturbance of the status quo. Perhaps it is because they are hanging on to what they believe so strongly that they are blinded to the truth. Or perhaps God is preventing them from believing so God can carry out his plan of redemption. It is said that Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead is a foretelling of his own resurrection. As the events of Good Friday draw closer, the scriptures have Jesus moving closer to Jerusalem. And Jesus does not back away from God's divine plan.

Jesus listens to God, Lazarus has listened to Jesus; he heard, and obeyed the his voice. Even though Mary and Martha were devastated by the death of their brother, they now can rejoice in his second chance at life. It is also a way of their receiving new life because women were considered property, and as single women, having no man in their household, they had no rights. Just as Jesus gave life to his best friends, in our reading from Ezekiel God gives Ezekiel a vision that the Israelites would be given a second chance at life.

More than 500 years before the birth of Christ, while in Babylonian captivity, Ezekiel had 7 visions from God which included messages of judgement on Israel and on other nations, and promises of future blessings on the people of Israel. Chapter 37 of Ezekiel begins in a lifeless place where the prophet was sent into a valley of dry bones. God asks Ezekiel if the bones can live and Ezekiel, thinking, no way could these dry bones possibly live, replies that only God knows. We feel these times of dry bones any time we are faced with something that seems impossible for us. Any time we feel discouraged. Any time we don't think we can make it through another day, we know what these dry bones feel like. But, like the prophet Ezekiel, we know that nothing is impossible with God. "O Lord God, you know. You know resurrection."

God tells Ezekiel to tell the bones to hear the word of the Lord because God's word has the power to create something new, to bring life to the dead. God's word revives, rejuvenates, restores. God spoke the world into being and breathed life into Adam. In Psalms 119:25 we hear a person who is deep in the depths of depression, his soul clinging to the dust, crying out to God, "Revive me according to your

word." Give me life, he asks, according to your world creating word. Just as Lazarus walked out of the tomb with Jesus' life-giving word, we see God's word throughout the Bible giving life.

God's word is so opposite of the world with its empty, meaningless messages. We are constantly bombarded with messages by television, radio, billboards, ads on our smart phones. Some of these words are not true, some are deceptive, some are trying to manipulate us. We are unsure of the truth in the messages we are receiving on a daily basis.

Yet, amid his own dry, dusty, lifeless experience in exile, Ezekiel is willing to trust the word of God. He is willing to put his trust into the words of God who said, "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." (vv. 5-6).

God promises breath to enter the bones---literally, he causes *ruah* to enter. *Ruah* is the Hebrew word for breath, wind, and spirit. *Ruah*, the "wind from God that sweeps over the face of the waters at the beginning of creation." *Ruah*, the Holy Spirit that we need in order to feel the presence of God (Ps 51:11) Breath. Wind. Spirit. God puts it into us so we can live.

Ezekiel trusts and speaks God's word. As he prophesied to the bones, he reports, "suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone." Sinews, flesh and skin appear on the bones, and they begin to look like living beings. All they lack is the breath of life – God's *ruah*. And so Ezekiel prophesies to the breath, and "the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." God's power brings the dry bones back to life. What was dry, dusty, field of dead bones is now alive. New life comes from the breath of God.

God has Ezekiel assure Israel they will be brought back to life and returned to their homeland. God promises, "you shall live and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act" (v. 14).

God gave new life to Lazarus, to Mary, to Martha, to Israel, and God gives us new life as individuals and as communities. A woman walked into a Presbyterian church in Virginia, unsure of what to expect. She had grown up in a home with no religion and no talk of God. But the members of the church welcomed her, befriended her, included her, and nurtured her in the Christian faith.

After being baptized and becoming a church member, she said to the congregation, "Just a few years ago, I tiptoed into the narthex as one who did not believe in God. Your support transformed me and I stand before you now confidently and say that I do now believe in God. I know I could just leave it at that, but you as a congregation have always expected me to go a bit deeper, to explore that more. Part of your nurture of faith has asked me to seek meaning so I can live into that which I say I believe. So to say that I believe in God means for me that I believe that hope is stronger than despair, that within darkness there is light, that death is never final, that in any sadness there is an opportunity for joy."

Life giving power is found in God's word. God can revive individuals, congregations, and communities. When dry bones join together we discover that hope is stronger than despair, death is never final, and sadness can give way to joy. All glory be to God.