

Throughout this season of Lent, we have wandered behind Jesus making connections that he is the promised Messiah and the Son of God. We have wandered through the wilderness, through fire, water, and behind our shepherd. Today we wander into the valley where we experience the miracle of resurrection.

Throughout the Bible, we see that resurrection was not something that only happened in the New Testament. In 1 Kings 17 and 2 King 4, Elijah and Elisha brought a boy back to life. In our Scripture for today from Ezekiel 37 we see resurrection occur when the dry bones came back to life.

In Ezekiel’s vision he stands before a valley of dried bones. In the words of the coroner from “The Wizard of Oz” these bones were not just dead, they were “really most sincerely dead.” No more flesh appeared upon them and it looked as though they had been baking in the sun for many years.

There was no hope for these bones. But then God asked Ezekiel a question: “Mortal can these bones live?”¹ I believe that God is asking us the same question today. Can the church continue to live during a pandemic? Can we continue to hold unto hope even when the future is uncertain?

Today God is calling us to be the church so that even at this moment in time we can experience resurrection.

The miracle of the dry bones in the valley is that God brought them to life with the breath of God. This same breath of God brought life to Adam and Eve; it is the breath of God that fell upon those who experienced Pentecost. This same breath of God, the Holy Spirit, beckons to us, that we too may hear the word of God and respond. This same Holy Spirit continues to give us breath and move us forward even in times of deep grief. This same Holy Spirit binds us for life to one another to care for each other in the name of God.

This Scripture speaks to us on many levels today because for the last two weeks we have also experienced resurrection. As our churches have opened back up and we have been able to worship together we have seen how God has restored the dry bones of the church and turned it once again into a living and breathing organism.

Our spiritually dry bones have come to life once again as we prepare to celebrate Easter and even sing outside in praise to God. Through reading the Scripture from both the Old and New Testament today we are reminded that there are signs of resurrection all around us. The question before us today is how can we be part of Christ’s ministry of resurrection in the world today?

First, we must believe that resurrection is a certain reality. This is the premise of our faith, that through believing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we will also experience resurrection. We also must believe that resurrection is a present reality, and that God is still bringing new life out of situations of certain death.

Over this past year I experienced resurrection in the life of Bernice Welch. I joked many times with Bernice that if I were to preach at her funeral, I would compare her to Lazarus. Bernice was someone who came back from the dead again and again fighting to stay alive so that she could spend more time with her family. Although Bernice passed away last year and experienced her moment of resurrection, she modeled for me the power of love and the miracle of resurrection in this life.

Resurrection still happens in the world today and can take on many different forms. For instance, I have seen families experience resurrection when they find a way to move forward together after experiencing grief or hardship. I have seen people experience resurrection when they had stopped believing in themselves, and then have found newfound confidence in the direction in which God is leading them to go. I see resurrection in our churches every Sunday, when people come to church even when I know that is physically and emotionally difficult for them to do so. Resurrection is happening all around us, if we would only open our eyes to see what God is doing.

Jesus carried on the ministry of resurrection in the New Testament. He brought back to life the widow of Nain’s Son, Jairus’ daughter, and Lazarus. Ultimately, we experienced Jesus’ resurrection showing that God could defeat even death for us. Before this moment of resurrection, we find Mary and her sister Martha in a season of death in John 11. They could resound with David’s words from Psalm 23 as they were living in the “valley of the shadow of death...”² The hard truth is that before resurrection can occur there must be death.

During the season of Lent, we are invited to die to ourselves, so that we can be raised anew with Christ on Easter Sunday. For 40 days we die to our pride, our bitterness, our fear, our hatred, and our inability to forgive. It is hard to let things die because they become so familiar to us, and yet when they fall away, we feel lighter and realize how much those things had been weighing us down all along. Mary and Martha were not ready to let Lazarus die, but had he not died, they would not have experienced this moment of resurrection.

When Jesus arrived at their house, they were not happy to see him, to put it lightly there were angry. They told him all the things he should have done to prevent their

brother’s death. They had sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was very sick, but in their eyes, Jesus did not come in time and all hope seemed to be lost. They had lost their faith and trust in their friend Jesus. Jesus arrived on the fourth day after Lazarus’ death. This is significant because commentary tells us that “according to popular Jewish belief...the soul hovered around the body in the grave for three days after death, hoping to reenter the body. But after the third day...the soul [left] the body for good.”³ So on the fourth day, like the dry bones, Lazarus was really dead and there was no hope of him coming back.

Jesus knew something they did not know. Jesus knew that Lazarus would experience resurrection. This resurrection event would also foreshadow the resurrection that was about to happen to Jesus. Jesus called to Lazarus, “Come out!”⁴ As we think about this scene, I think about Mary and Martha, probably looking at Jesus with disbelief. Why was he calling to their dead brother? He was already dead. But just as God rose the dead bones in the valley, Christ awakened the dead bones of Lazarus.

Jesus also beckons to us. When we are feeling spiritually dead and bound with worry and regret over the past and the present, Jesus calls us out of the tomb of death and despair into new life. Jesus calls us out of the water, the fire, the darkness, the valley and even out of the tomb so that we may also experience resurrection.

Are we heeding Christ’s call, or are we hiding in the tomb unsure if we are ready to come out? Over the past year we have all been sitting in a tomb of isolation, unable to venture out of our houses to our favorite places and be with our favorite people. We have been wondering when the stone in front of the tomb would be removed so that we could return to our lives as we once knew them. Our gospel lesson today reminds us that even a pandemic cannot stop Christ from offering us resurrection and new life. We have to stop waiting to live into the promise of resurrection.

On that important day, Jesus told Martha: “I am 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.”⁵ Although Martha could not fathom the ramifications of Jesus’ statement, she professes her faith in him anyway.

We also cannot fully understand the promise of the resurrection, but through our faith in Jesus Christ, we also get to experience it. This is our hope, that through our faith in Jesus Christ that we are never separated from God, not even for a moment.

The good news for our lives is that our resurrection lives can begin today.

We don't have to wait for our physical bodies to die. Our resurrection life begins when we know that death does not have the final word. When we know that pandemics do not have the final word, but that God defeats death and claims victory over everything. Through our faith in Jesus Christ, we are promised that we experience healing and get to spend every moment of our spiritual lives in the presence of God. We can start participating in this healing ministry through embodying our role as the body of Christ.

What is beautiful about the story of Lazarus is that it is the community who unbinds him from his wrappings of death. There he is after his resurrection, alive, but trapped in the clothes he was buried in. Mummified he walks out, but he cannot be free without the help of the body of Christ. The gift of the church is a gift of grace from God. It is the body of Christ who can also help us to be unbound from our worry, our past, and our present. It is the body of Christ who can help us look forward to the future with hope.

Our role as the body of Christ is to provide sinews for people as they are seeking to experience new life. In the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel we see that the first sign of life that the bones showed was that they developed sinews. Commentary tells us that sinews are what “[binds] bone to bone.”⁶

We are called to be sinews, that things that help people get a first glimpse of new life that is available to them through their faith in Jesus Christ. We are called to identify people who are living in a season of death and to be part of Christ's ministry of resurrection in their lives.

Who is one person that you can identify in your life today who is trapped in a season of death? Perhaps you know someone who has experienced profound loss of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or the loss of themselves. We are called to meet people where they are and journey with them as we point to the signs of resurrection all around us. May we continue to be beacons of new life to all that we encounter. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ NRSV. Ezekiel 37:3.

² NRSV. Psalm 23:4.

³ Leander Keck et al. “The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary. Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 583.

⁴ NRSV. John 11:43.

⁵ NRSV. John 11:25-26.

⁶ Leander Keck et al. “The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary. Vol. V. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 340.