

Sermon – Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
5 Lent – Year A  
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“Can These Bones Live?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Do you remember? Do you remember a time before we all mastered new digital, streaming technologies in the span of a few days? When you could go and visit your aging parent in their nursing home? Do you remember when a stranger coming within a few feet of you was an opportunity to meet a new friend, not a threat of becoming ill? When the streets were full, and the shops were open? Do you remember 21 days ago when we last gathered for Sunday worship together in this space? Do you remember when we rushed to get our children off to school instead of preparing to help them with their e-learning? When you could tell the difference between a Tuesday and a Saturday? Do you remember? These last two weeks feel like two years and, while this is certainly a bit hyperbolic, it's hard to remember what life was like before the coronavirus began its reign. Staring out at a world that has suddenly changed, do you remember?
2. I wonder what Ezekiel remembered of the better days into which he was born, days before the pestilence of Babylonian conquest had descended upon his people. Now, in a vision, he stares out at a gruesome scene. A dry, dusty valley stretches out before him, filled with dry, dusty bones. It is an image of his people, come now to wrack and ruin, some actually dead and the rest of them as good as. The bones, as we hear in the explanation of the vision, are the whole house of Israel. God's people have lost their hope; they

- are cut off completely. Not even their bones – dry, dusty – are connected one to the other. Can one remember a time before this? Will God remember?
3. To remember is bring to mind an awareness of the past, a meaning consistent with the word's Latin roots. In English, however, it takes on a secondary meaning, because a member is someone or something that belongs to something larger than itself. We, for example, are members of Grace Church. The Lord asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel's answer is a cry of hope: "O Lord God, you know." If anyone can do something about this wretched state of affairs, it is you, God. So what does God do? God remembers. Which is to say, God re-members. God takes bone and re-members it to bone, sinew to sinew, flesh to flesh. Where once there was nothing but the dry, dustiness of death and separation, God re-creates life through remembrance and reconnection. Ezekiel prophesies at the Lord's command, and the very breath of life speeds on the four winds to fill the dead with life. Can these bones live? Yes. When the Lord remembers, the bones, the people, are re-membered. Put back together. For God, remembering is not just an act of thought, it is the intention to act.
  4. It is this intention that is embodied in Jesus, God incarnate. For Jesus, it's personal. Near the end of his own life, Jesus doesn't see a vision of dry bones. He hears, instead, of the very dead bones of his beloved friend, Lazarus. He journeys to Bethany, no doubt remembering time spent with his friend and his sisters, Mary and Martha. He weeps in the face of death, seeing death for what it is – the thief that robs us of our loved ones. Lazarus is dead. He is not, like the hero in *The Princess Bride*, mostly dead. He's been dead four days, trapped behind a stone and within a stench. There is nothing to do but mourn, remembering what once was and what might have been. But where we can only remember, Jesus re-members. He puts Lazarus back together, body and breath, and his friend comes out of the cave, blinking in the sunlight at the wonder of it all.

5. It is not hard to find our place in this story. We are the dry, dusty bones, cut off from one another, from life as we once knew it. We are Lazarus, as good as dead. This, by the way, is not because of the coronavirus. It is because of the reality proclaimed by the Apostle Paul. We, in our flesh, our dead to sin. Sure, we might be walking around, six feet apart, but there is no breath in us. Not, that is, until Jesus breathes forth the Spirit and brings us back to life. Jesus calls us out of our dusty tombs, commands that which binds us to fall away, and restores us to one another. Lazarus to Mary and Martha. Me to you.
  
6. Yes, we continue to walk through this dry, dusty valley. We don't yet know how extensive, how costly, the tyranny of this virus will be. Already it has claimed the lives of more than 30,000 people, and the toll in our country crossed 2,000 over the weekend. Doctors and nurses work valiantly to save the lives of strangers, and still we can't seem to mobilize a coherent, coordinated response. Lord, have mercy. This is a valley of dry bones, indeed. The language has stopped being metaphorical. This is real. So what do we do? Can these bones live? O Lord God, you know. In the face of death, we look to Jesus. Here, in the seventh and final sign of his ministry, Jesus proclaims that he is the resurrection and the life. Jesus, and Jesus only, is one who will see us through. He will remember those who have died, and re-member them in the resurrection. He will remember our congregation and community, and he will re-member us back together when this crisis is past, even as he dwells within each of us now – connecting us even while we are physically apart.
  
7. The God we worship is the God of life. In our sin, we have walled ourselves off from God. In our sickness, we have found ourselves isolated. In death, we are all alone. Until we aren't, that is. For this is precisely where Jesus joins us, behind the tomb of death so that we can return, unbound and free forever, blinking into the light of a new day. Jesus will not have it any other way. Death and disease do not get the last word. As the band Mumford and Sons

sing in “Roll Away Your Stone,” “You’ve gone too far this time/You have neither reason nor rhyme/With which to take this soul that is so rightfully mine.” Our souls, our lives, belong to God and, try as they might, neither sin nor suffering, neither disease nor death, can lay claim to that which God has purchased through the cross of Christ.

8. As you seek to remember, remember this: You belong to God, for Christ gave himself for you. Wherever you are, however cut off from others you feel, Jesus dwells in you and the Spirit is breathing new life into you, even now. Remember, God could bring bones back together and Lazarus back to life. God will see us through this. If nothing else, remember that God remembers, and that God re-members. God will put us back together yet, as sure as Jesus was raised from the dead. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.