

**Sermon for Lent 5**  
by the Rev Anthony Bassett

29 March 2020  
St John's, Norway

Year A  
Ezekiel 37. 1–14  
Psalm 130  
Romans 8. 6–11  
John 11. 1–45

*“Can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37. 3)*

Whenever anyone moves to a new home, it is hard to know what to pack and what *not* to pack:

- Do we keep all of our books? NO.
- Do we keep many of our family photos? YES.
- As we all know, packing is about *deciding* what we really need, deciding in what to place our *hope*.

Sometime after 585 BCE, the prophet Ezekiel delivered the message in today's first reading to the Jewish people, who were living with him in exile in Babylon. They were deciding what they really needed, deciding in what to place their hope. Their temple had been destroyed, and their holy city of Jerusalem had been plundered. They had been marched against their will to Babylon and carried very little with them. They had lost heart and suffered a death of the spirit. God recognized that they felt *hopeless* and gave Ezekiel an *allegorical vision* of a valley of *dry bones*. In that vision, those bones represented “the whole house of Israel” who spoke to Ezekiel and said, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.” (*Ezek 37. 11*) The meaning of that vision was this. God recognized that gradually the soul of the Jewish exiles had withered and died, and they had become as lifeless as a valley of dry bones. And so, God asked Ezekiel this important question: “Can these bones *live*?” (*Ezek 37. 3*)

God asks us the same question from time to time when we lose hope about our future. During this time of COVID-19, many are anxious and losing hope. Perhaps some of us are losing hope that things will return to normal. “Can these bones live?” is still an important question for us today. And what is the *answer*? [*Feasting on the Word*, Yr A, Vol 2, p. 122, 124, 125]

God gave Ezekiel the answer in the form of a *promise* that only God could give. God told Ezekiel to *speak* to the bones and say: “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause *breath* to enter you, and you *shall live*.” (*Ezek 37. 5*) God invited Ezekiel to participate directly in this vision, and as Ezekiel spoke “suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together.” They *re-assembled* with sinew, flesh, and skin. (*Ezek 37. 7–8*) Next, God *breathed life* into the bones in the same way in which God breathed life into the first humans in the beginning. The bones were *re-animated* and stood on their feet as “a vast multitude.” (*Ezek 37. 10*) It was a vision of *re-creation*. And so, from his vision Ezekiel understood that God would give his fellow

exiles new life and hope, and they would one day return to the land of Israel. [Ezek 37. 12–14; Feasting 127]

Ezekiel’s vision gave *collective hope* to a particular people at a particular time. Yet, his vision also implied something *more* for all people in every time. It implied that God values each *individual person*, including their *body* which *expresses* their unique personality. Therefore, Ezekiel’s vision pointed to the additional hope that God promises *bodily resurrection*, and this became a central belief for both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. [Feasting 122] For such hope to become a reality and for individual bodies to be given life after death *requires* a miracle that is utterly dependent upon God and beyond our powers. For us, Ezekiel’s vision is “a glimpse of [God’s] pure power,” a reminder of who is in charge of preserving each individual life. Real hope lies in [knowing and being connected to] that *Source*. [Feasting 124, paraphrasing from the poem *Bones*] And yet, Ezekiel’s vision was just that—*only a vision*. In today’s Gospel story about the raising of Lazarus, Jesus Christ began to make that vision into a reality.

The raising of Lazarus is the last in a series of seven “signs” mentioned in *John’s Gospel*. It signified that the visions and promises of the prophets like Ezekiel were being realized by Jesus Christ in time and history. In this story, Christ’s friend, Lazarus, had been dead for four days, and so he was *truly dead*. Christ was “deeply moved” and “began to weep.” [John 11. 33–35 NRSV; “Jesus wept.” = KJV, RSV] He asked for the stone to be taken away from the entrance to Lazarus’ tomb. It was as if Christ himself was in Ezekiel’s valley, and so, like Ezekiel before him, Christ spoke to Lazarus’ dead bones and cried: “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11. 43) The man who had been dead for four days came forth from the darkness. It was a *sign* that death was not the end. However, the *burial cloths* that bound Lazarus’ hands and feet and covered his face were a vivid reminder that *death still clung* to him. Death had not yet been overcome. [Feasting 141, 142, 145]

*What* was going through Christ’s mind in this whole story? It was something much *more personal* than what occurred in Ezekiel’s vision of collective restoration in the valley of dry bones. In his interaction with Lazarus, Christ *saw foreshadowed* his own future when he would walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We heard that *first*, he “looked upward and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me,’ ” ... and *then*, he cried “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11. 41–43) So the sequence was this: *first*, Christ spoke to his Father on behalf of Lazarus, and *then* he spoke directly to Lazarus. And as Christ spoke all these words, he experienced his own destiny. He experienced the sequence by which he also would learn to commit himself to his Father and hope to be called out of his own tomb. He himself would learn how to wait in hope, but that is the story that we shall leave for Holy Week. This morning let us notice how Christ *recognized*, and *acknowledged*, and *valued* Lazarus as a unique *individual person* whose life and friendship was continued in the presence of Christ *himself*, and his Father, and their lifegiving Spirit. Let us notice how the whole Trinity drew Lazarus out of the darkness of death into their life.

And the whole Trinity can draw each of us out of our own darkness, suffering, guilt, shame, or hopelessness, as well as out of the loneliness and anxiety that we are experiencing in this difficult time of COVID-19. The Trinity can draw us into their presence just as they drew

Lazarus into their presence. *There* we will feel recognized and valued as individuals and will find new life and hope. *Then* we can extend that *recognition* and *hope* to others.

- Therefore, during Holy Week, let us be drawn deeper into the divine *presence* as Ezekiel was, as Christ was, and as Lazarus was.
- In that presence, let us deepen our awareness of how Christ *values* each of us just as he valued Lazarus. May this awareness help us to re-discover life and hope.
- And with this hope, let us *act* in Christ's eyes *as we* in his eyes *should act*, that is, let us act *as Christ*. For as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins reminds us: "Christ plays [out his life] in ten thousand places, ...to the Father through the features of [our] faces."  
[paraphrasing G.M. Hopkins' poem, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*] **Amen.**