

Lent 5
Rev. Timothy C. Linstrom
Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit, Lincolnshire, Illinois

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We see so many sides of Jesus in this long gospel lesson for today. We see his obedience to God, allowing his friend to die so that the Son of Man might be glorified through the healing, creating, resurrecting power of God. We see his close relationship to a group of friends in Mary, Martha, and Lazerus, and how deeply he cared for them, as he wept with other mourners at Lazerus' grave. We see Jesus as teacher as he teaches faith to Martha and Mary, and we see Jesus as savior, for he is the resurrection and the life, he gives life to Lazerus who was dead, and even though we too will die, we will live. For everyone who lives and believes in Jesus Christ will never die.

And no one could attest to that better than Lazerus, who died but was raised to live again. But after that life-changing day, we don't really know what happened to Lazerus. There are a few different traditions that describe what he did with his second chance on life, one story says he went to France where he became a bishop of the early church, another says he ended up in Cyprus with his sisters to develop the church there, but we can't be sure. Whatever happened, we imagine that Lazerus spent the rest of his life devoted to telling others about the Christ who had given him life – not just by raising him physically from the dead, but also by giving him a new life of purpose. He awoke to new life, but also to a new reality in Jesus Christ.

And so Lazerus poses a spiritual challenge to all of us – to view life through the lens of death; to look backward at life from its endpoint rather than always forward; to recognize that while death comes to us all, we should prepare for that death not by fearing it but by facing it.

To put it another way, we don't have to sleepwalk through life and wait for death in order to wake up. We can have a second chance, an opportunity to die more than once – to die to self, as Paul put it – to put behind us an old life and awaken to a new one filled with new adventures, renewed relationships, and ultimate purpose.

We've probably all heard stories of people who have had near death experiences, or who were officially dead like Lazerus surely was, and how for many, it changes them. They suddenly realize what's really important. So our text challenges us to think that way. For if we were to die today – but were given a second lease on life, how would we live it differently? How would we live differently with our spouse, with our God, with our children, with our church?

The coronavirus has also called our attention to this as we hear how many have died and how the numbers keep growing. This new challenge to the human race has created a lot of uncertainty in our life. We're living with a lot of adjustments and inconveniences, and we've all been thrown out of our normal rhythm of things. If you're feeling a little stressed, or like there's just some pressure that you're feeling that you don't know where it's coming from, it is the result of all these significant interruptions in

our life, and it's normal to experience this sense imbalance. And so we look to each other to receive comfort and understanding, and we look to God to provide guidance and wisdom, stability, and strength.

I believe the psalm writer could empathize with us for he wrote,
"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, Lord Hear my voice!"

For there is hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is the great power to restore and redeem.

I know that at difficult times in my life when the problems keep mounting, and I'm at the end of my rope, and there is no apparent solution, no relief in sight, the only answer is to give it up to the Lord. And I've heard many of your testimonies to this as well. You've experienced the lifting of burdens as you let go and let God. You've experienced new life out of the depths of despair. And you've experienced death on many different levels. But death is never the end in Jesus Christ.

And who knows that better than Ezekiel, for he was living at the lowest point in the history of Israel. His nation of Israel had been decimated, completely wiped out by the Babylonian army. It was no contest, they had no chance against the military superiority of Babylon. And afterwards it was like after the battle of Gettysburg in the Civil War, the worst battle imaginable, with dead bodies by the thousands. Their bodies sprawled out in the desert sands, laying there to rot in the sun. The whole desert as far as the eye could see was covered with dried up bones. They were everywhere. And the temple was destroyed, the capital city destroyed. The people were in total poverty, with everybody hungry and on the edge of starvation. And most of the Israelite people who were alive were taken as prisoners, chains around their necks, and dragged back to Babylonia to become slaves.

So the people lamented to themselves, "God can't help us. God won't help us. There is no God. God is punishing us for our sins. We are here to rot and die in the desert. We have become like dry bones."

But then the Lord took Ezekiel out to this valley of death, to look out across the desert floor at all those dry bones, and he asked Ezekiel can these bones live?

If God ever asks you the question, "Can these bones live?" the correct answer is always a resounding "Yes!!! Yes Lord!!" Ezekiel's answer was, "Lord, you know these bones can live." But to make sure he believed it God commanded Ezekiel to prophecy to the bones, to tell the bones to hear the word of the Lord, that God will cause breath to enter you and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord. And the bones began to come together, and suddenly there are muscles, flesh, and skin. But there is no breath in them. So God commands Ezekiel to prophecy once again, and when he does, breath comes into them and they live.

Ezekiel, lived in the midst of tragic times, but he knew that God is the God of possibilities! God is the God of optimism and confidence and hope! Even in the face of unbelievable obstacles. He can transform us; from dried bones to having a little bit of

guts, to spiritual strength. Can these bones live? Yes Lord, you know it and we know it! That is the kind of optimism we are called to in the face of all obstacles. When we call upon the Lord and the spirit of God comes into our spirit, it slowly permeates all aspect of our life. It effects how we act, how we think, how we feel, how we live. And with that spirit of God, God can take that which is dead and make it alive.

After all, when the people of Israel felt that their hope was dead in Babylon, the word of God was "you shall live."

When Lazerus lie dead for four days, the word of God was, "come out of there, you shall live."

When Jesus Christ was rejected and reviled, flogged, and finally killed on a cross, the word of God was, "you shall live."

When the early church faced opposition and persecution, from Jewish leaders and from Roman authorities, the word of God was, "you shall live."

When our church has been challenged by changing times, to fulfill its mission to this community, the word of God has continued to be, "you shall live."

When we were dead in trespasses and sins, the word of God was, "you shall live."

When we are stuck in a barren place, when we are at the end of our rope, when we have no place to go, when we are without hope, the word of God is, "you shall live."

God says to us, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

And all the people of God say, "Amen."