

Lent 5

April 6

Ezekiel 37: 1-14; Romans 8: 6-11; John 11: 1-45.

The promise of new life.

All of our readings today encourage us to choose life, but just how hard is that to do. It may seem an easy thing to do, but life is sometimes not as easy as it seems. What does life mean, what does death mean. We see in our first reading Isaiah telling of a vision he has been given where dry bones are knitted back together and where they also are 'reanimated' to be covered in flesh as well. But these bones are not the bones of those who have died, who have either been killed by oppressors or died through sacrifice, these bones are metaphor for those in exile who feel 'cut off' from God because of their exile. For those in exile, being cut off from God was as if they were dead. Ezekiel's vision is thick with despair. But to this despair Ezekiel offers another metaphor, one which shows God's presence, the ready availability of breath. This 'ruach', this breath, is a message of life giving force. And it is all from God. God is breathing life into their existence in exile. Despite them being in exile, God is promising that they are not cut off from God's presence, God is present with them, God is always present with them, always near them, as near to them as their own breath. This vision from Ezekiel cannot take them out of exile, it cannot alleviate their disastrous circumstances, but it does give them a promise that they will return to their own land. They will remain in exile for the present time, but they are given a promise of God's presence with them. This standing multitude of bones take on a different connotation. God is present, the people of Israel can breathe, and they can stand ready for the future, looking expectantly forward in hope.

Mary and Martha also feel despair. Their brother has died. They asked Jesus for help and he arrived too late. Both of them declare confidence in Jesus ability to heal, they both agree that their brother will 'rise on the last day' but this is hardly comfort for them now. Martha and Mary show the same despair and same feeling of hopelessness as the people of Israel. But Jesus shows them there is hope; there is reason to see new hope because 'life' is present even in death. Jesus 'I am' statement here is the last time we see it in this Gospel. Jesus tells them 'I am the resurrection and the life'. He tells Martha that everyone who believes in him will never die. There are now new meanings for life and death, just as we saw in Ezekiel. 'Live' in Jesus' statement does not just mean alive, but to those who have the life of God within them. These will never die; they will never be separated from God. In Christ, the future resurrection which the Jews freely accepted has spilled over into the present. The future event is becoming present in view of Christ's death and resurrection and as a sign of that presentness, Lazarus will experience resurrection in the present. This does not mean there is no longer a future hope of resurrection in the last days, but it does mean that for those who are in Christ the anxiety about what the last day will look like disappears, for them the last day has already begun. We live in that time now. Our last day has already begun.

When Lazarus walks out of the tomb, Jesus tells those there to 'unbind him, release him', release him from that which binds him to his tomb. He is risen, and being raised from the

dead entails becoming, once again, a member of a community which is dedicated to loving each other in the liberating love of Jesus Christ.

For those of you who witnessed, lived through the aftermath of the 2011 floods, think back to those who were involved in the 'clean up', especially those cleaning up their own homes. Covered in mud, tired, bedraggled, in shock, emotionally drained as well as physically drained by what they saw. And at the end of the day, these people gathered together, ate together, relaxed together. They may still have been wearing those grotty clothes, they still didn't yet have a home, but they had community, they had relationship, they were 'reborn', they all experienced their own 'mini' resurrection. Maybe that resurrection occurred daily, as each day ended and they once again had opportunity to enter community and relationship. We are all given that opportunity. We are invited into relationship, into community with God, we are all offered resurrection, new life, as we accept and live into the eternal life we are offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The story of Lazarus can become for us our story. Have I heard the voice of God and come out of the grave? Do I still have the stench of death and carry the wrappings of the entombed? Can I allow myself to be 'unbound'? Jesus says to us what he said to Martha, "Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" I ask myself is Christ in my life, is Christ in your life? The raising of Lazarus, like the other signs we find in John's Gospel, like the sinewed bones rising before the eyes of Ezekiel, are a promise. In our profession of faith, we are not asked to agree to a 'fait accompli', we are asked to believe, to trust a promise made to us, that even though we die, we will live. The eternal life Jesus gives to his followers does not abolish death, it transcends it. We are challenged to continue to believe this. Faith in the risen Jesus is not fully developed until it enables us to face physical death with the firm confidence that the present possession of eternal life is not simply a pledge of resurrection on the last day, but is a present and continuing participation in the life of the ever-living Jesus now, at this moment. Those who believe in Jesus never truly die. Martha's confession of faith is a response to Jesus who reveals himself as the resurrection and the life.

We, like the people of Israel are given a promise of God's presence with us. God is as close to us as our breath. God is present, we can breathe and we too stand ready for the future, looking expectantly forward in hope, in the knowledge that resurrection is not just in our future, but it is in our present, every day.

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