

Readings for Sunday March 29 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NIV)

37 The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!' ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" ⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. ¹¹ Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'"

John 11:1-45 (NIV)

11 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷ and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light." ¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." ¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get

better.”¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead,¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.”²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.³⁴ “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied.³⁵ Jesus wept.³⁶ Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Sermon: In Whom Do We Put Our Trust?

Sometimes we're frustrated with politicians and other leaders and shout, "Why don't you do something! Can't you see that this is a crisis and it demands an urgent response?" And when they finally make up their mind, it's too little too late, the problem is even larger than it originally was. This is certainly a feature of today's story of Jesus and Lazarus. Mary and Martha had sent a message to Jesus telling him that his dear friend Lazarus was sick, expecting Jesus would come rushing to heal him. But he did not, and Lazarus died.¹ We have just listened to this story, one that's perhaps familiar because movies of the life of Jesus love to include this visually dramatic episode. But as we have already discovered, John like to add layers of meaning in his Gospel.² In previous weeks, we heard this in the cases of Nicodemus³ and the Samaritan woman at the well⁴ where there were double meanings to the words "born again" and "living water." We need, therefore, to expect a deeper message in this account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead; it is far *more* than a miracle story! We are alerted to the added meaning of events quite early on. The way John tells it, Jesus cryptically said to his disciples, "This sickness will *not* end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that *God's Son may be glorified through it.*"⁵

That is a very *odd* thing to say. What does it mean? To help explain this strange saying, we need zoom back to the bigger picture. John's Gospel is structured with seven so-called "signs," which is John's word for a "miracle."⁶ The first sign is the turning of the water into wine at the wedding in Cana,⁷ and last week I briefly mentioned the healing of the man who was born blind.⁸ The seventh sign is the raising of Lazarus.⁹ John employs the word "sign" because he wants it to point to the *identity* of Jesus, rather than to the miracle itself. So when Jesus says, "Lazarus' sickness will *not* end in death, it is so that *God's Son may be glorified through it,*"¹⁰ this is *not* out of megalomania! No, the way John tells it, Jesus knew¹¹

¹ John 11:1,3,17-19. Note too v5: "Now Jesus *loved* Martha and her sister and Lazarus." [We also tend to read this story through Luke's description of Mary and Martha, and maybe make a connection with a parable: Luke 16: 19–31; 10:38–42.]

² This is one reason John's gospel is different from the other three. It is often seen as *theological* commentary on the life of Jesus. For this reason, John's Gospel can be hard to understand.

³ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Confusing-Conversation-with-Nicodemus.pdf> .

⁴ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Jesus-Giver-of-Living-Water.pdf> .

⁵ John 11:4 – and then Jesus stayed where he was for 2 more days (v6). Note Jesus says something similar in John 9:3. Jesus' response in both texts turns the focus away from the illness, as such, to an occasion for revelation.

⁶ In the other 3 gospels, the different Greek word used for miracle means a "mighty deed" (of God) indicating that the *kingdom of God* is near (or at hand) – see Mark 1:15; Matt3:2; 4:17; Luke 17:21.

⁷ John 2:1-11. The other signs are: (2) The healing of the royal official's son - John 4:46-54; (3) The healing of the man who was paralysed at Bethsaida – John 5:1-15; (4) The feeding of the 5000 – John 6:5-14; (5) Jesus walks on water – John 6:16-14; (6) see [8]. The is an implied 8th sign – the (death and) resurrection of Jesus. John frequently mentions, "through these signs many people believed in him"; see also John 20:30-31.

⁸ John 9:1-41; See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Asking-The-Wrong-Question.pdf>

⁹ John 11:1-45.

¹⁰ John 11:4. John's "glorification" of Jesus had three phases, Jesus being *lifted-up* on the cross, *raised* from the dead, and *ascending* into heaven (the latter is implied). ["Glory" is a key theme in John's Gospel – see John 1:14; 17:1-5.]

¹¹ "Senses" or "knows"?! John's portrayal of Jesus is one who is 'controlling' events – including his death. See also [11].

that the raising of Lazarus will set in motion events that would lead to his *own* death.¹² At which point you may well, ask, “Why then did Jesus wait 2 days?” It’s a great question! I suspect Jesus sensed that Lazarus was already dead; we are told as much later on.¹³ More importantly, Jesus knew that his “hour” was coming;¹⁴ he knew this was the *right* time to act *in this way* because it was *God’s* time.

You see, John is a masterful story-teller and he is bringing the whole ministry of Jesus to a climax here. He has already given us hints; earlier in John 5 we read: “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so *the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it*. Very truly I tell you, *a time is coming and has now come* when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.”¹⁵ And when a Jew hears those words, they are reminded of Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones and the subsequent promise of God: “My people, I am *going* to open your graves and bring you up from them . . . Then you, my people, will *know* that I am the LORD . . . I will put my Spirit in you and you will live. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.”¹⁶ What John therefore saying *in* all this is that the raising of Lazarus is not *just* a very special miracle.¹⁷ It stresses the unique identity of Jesus and his special relationship with God the Father.¹⁸ It is also a *pinnacle* of a series are signs that Jesus performs which reveal the presence and power of God at work *through* him, including supremacy over death itself. The raising of Lazarus signifies that what Ezekiel and all Israel had hoped for in the *distant* future is now *stunningly* being *realized* in the *present*.¹⁹ Primed with this insight, let briefly consider the conversation between Jesus and Martha, as that is where the spotlight is shining.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him.²⁰ “Lord,” she said, “*if only* you had been here, my brother would *not* have died.”²¹ That phrase, “if only” is one with which we can all identify. In “if only” there is a tone of regret, lost hope, and of the inability to put back the clock. Even so, Martha is not moaning or reprimanding Jesus as her next sentence displays her profound faith and hope *in* Jesus as a healer; she says: “But I know that *even now* God will give you whatever you ask.”²² Even in the face of the finality of death, Martha expects Jesus is able to do *something*. Jesus responds,

¹² Earlier, in John 8:59, 10:31, 11:8, some Jews wanted to stone Jesus to death. He therefore knew what was in store.

¹³ In John 11:11,14,39, Lazarus had been dead 4 days; that being the case, did the extra 2 days delay make any difference.

¹⁴ John 11:9-10. See also <https://catholic-resources.org/John/Themes-Hour.htm> . God’s time (*kairos*) *not* our time (*chronos*).

¹⁵ John 5:21,25,28. Yes, this certainly has eschatological significance, but the raising of Lazarus (which prefigures Christ’s own resurrection) demonstrates in inaugurated eschatology (to use the technical term!) – the ‘life to come’ as *already begun* – and not merely begins at the end of time – that long-expected, Jewish, great “Day of the LORD.”

¹⁶ Ezek 37:12-14.

¹⁷ Note: the other gospels have stories of people being raised from the death: Matt 9:18–26; Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:40-56.

¹⁸ This is also a key theme in John’s “I AM” statements, which implicitly links Jesus as the embodiment of Israel’s God. It is also something John stresses in the next few chapters in the farewell discourse.

¹⁹ Through such acts, the early church understood Jesus to be *redefining* messianic expectations in his person and actions. Moreover, the reign of God was beginning *now* – with much more to come. See also [15].

²⁰ John 11:20.

²¹ John 11:21. See also 11:32 – Mary says the same thing.

²² John 11:22. *Lament* is a legitimate Jewish response in such circumstances, but even lament does not imply doubt.

“Your brother will rise again.”²³ This seems intentionally open-ended and therefore susceptible to misunderstanding. Did Martha believe what Jesus had told her? She replies, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”²⁴ What we don’t know is whether that gave her any sense of comfort or hope in the present. Regardless, she could not really understand what Jesus might mean - no more than any other disciple could understand it before he resurrection of Jesus. What Jesus says next is stunning: “*I am the resurrection and the life*. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”²⁵ The act of raising Lazarus from the dead is, then, a *sign* that demonstrates this bold claim of Jesus to the witnesses present and to all John’s readers.²⁶ It also means that if Jesus is indeed *the life*, then we are to live in present fearless of the finality of death because “eternal life” – life in God’s presence - has *already* begun.²⁷

Right now, we are all living in a time of great fear and uncertainty. We are worried about our health and the overall economy that supports our common livelihood. This powerful story for this last week of Lent sets us up for the coming events of Easter week. One of the scary things about COVID-19 is the apparent randomness as to who gets it, together with the stark reminder of our own mortality. In the face of this present reality, I believe this story breathes hope into those fears, and this will be reinforced by the Easter message. Put a different way, the story does *not deny the reality* of suffering and death, but speaks of how Jesus *transforms* them. We obviously *can’t* predict what the response of God will be in any given situation, but we have good reason to believe that it will always be some kind of *surprise*. Yet we *do* know the sort of shape it will take: Jesus will meet us in our problems and will burst into our present situation turning grief into good news with hope and new possibilities.

During this last week another story involving three people came to my mind. 50 years ago, on April 11, Apollo 13 blasted off into space to go to the moon. This was the mission that suffered an explosion and so grabbed the world’s attention; 25 years ago, it was made into major movie starring Tom Hanks. The astronauts, like us, were in uncharted territory and wondering what the outcome might be. The aspect of this story that struck me was true for all the Apollo missions that went to the moon. There comes a time when the spacecraft has to go around the so-called “dark side of the moon.”²⁸ There are two aspects to traversing the back-face of the moon, the first is that in the moon’s shadow there is the

²³ John 11:23.

²⁴ John 11:24. The great “Day of the LORD.” Note: Jews have not always believed in the resurrection at the end of time. Indeed, the Sadducees in Jesus day did *not* believe in the resurrection (see Acts 23:6-7; Mark 12:18). But for the previous 200-300 years, since the time of Daniel (Dan 12:2), belief in the resurrection had become widespread among the Jews - not least through the influence of the Pharisees. (The Pharisees prior belief in the resurrection facilitated some to later become Christians – including Paul; see Acts 15:1,5.)

²⁵ John 11:25,26a.

²⁶ Including ourselves; see John 20:29; 21:24-25.

²⁷ See John 3:16, 36; 5:24;6:47; 10:28; 17:2. This does not mean we do not *grieve*, for that is denial. However, the church’s experience the life of faith is grounded in the affirmation that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

²⁸ Of course, there is no “dark side,” just the face we do not (ever) see. [During the moon’s orbit around the Earth this unseen face *does* experience light from the Sun, especially at the time of a new moon.]

profound *darkness* of empty space – although the stars appear amazingly bright. The second is that, when the earth is no longer visible, there is complete radio *silence*. The twin elements of darkness and silence the astronauts experienced is perhaps the ultimate in “social distancing.” Indeed, we forget that element in a normal moon mission because our focus is on the two men who actually landed and walked on the moon. Yet there was always one astronaut who remained alone in the Apollo spacecraft, who repeatedly experienced those times of silence and the darkness as it orbited the moon, until the two men returned. Our story today has its conversations with Mary and Martha, but it is poor Lazarus who experiences the silence and darkness of death!²⁹ While orbiting the moon, the spacecraft’s trajectory is governed purely by gravity. In the movie, *Apollo 13*, Jim Lovell – played by Tom Hanks – says, “We have just put Sir Isaac Newton in the driving seat.” This made me ask, “*In whom do we trust*” in our crisis, where we too seem powerless to influence our pathway.

Martha’s trust was in Jesus. After Jesus’ bold claim, “*I am the resurrection and the life. . .*,”³⁰ he asked Martha a different question, “Do you *believe* this?”³¹ Martha responds with a remarkable confession of faith, “Yes, Lord. *I believe* that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”³² *If* Jesus is the Messiah, the One who was promised by the prophets, the one who has to *come into* the world – and *if* he is God’s own Son, the one in whom the living God is strangely and uniquely present, and *if* he is the resurrection-in-person, life-itself-come-to-life, then this story – *and all our stories* - takes on a different direction and dimension. If we *really* believe what Jesus said, it will transform the way we *live* in the *present* – with all its crises - because *death* itself³³ has been decisively overcome.

In conclusion, John’s Gospel ends in this way: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”³⁴

Let us live in the faith and hope that were evident in Martha. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁹ In this story there are *no words* associated with Lazarus, nor later in John 12:1-11.

³⁰ John 11:25,26a.

³¹ John 11:26b.

³² John 11:27. This needs to be seen as on a par with that of Thomas (John 20:28). These words, and others from John’s Gospel, inspired the song, “[I AM The Bread of Life.](#)”

³³ The *sign* of evil.

³⁴ John 20:30-31. John 21 is more of an appendix or epilogue to John’s Gospel.