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St. John's Episcopal Church
Lent 5/A

LAZARUS AND EZEKIEL: RESURRECTION STORIES

Lazarus has been dead for four days when Jesus finally arrives at Bethany. To remove any doubts about his state, we are told that there is already a stench from his body. There is no way this dead man could live again.

As he draws near to Bethany, first Martha, then Mary, runs to Jesus crying out and reproaching him. *"If only you had been here my brother, Lazarus, would not have died.* The whole town is in mourning. We can relate to the communal grief of a small community when one of our own town "saints" dies. The situation in Bethany seems hopeless.

This story is a powerful metaphor, a sign (*semeia*) that points to the resurrection of Jesus. The resuscitation of Lazarus is the last of seven signs in John's Gospel, which the author uses to establish Jesus as the Messiah. Raising Lazarus from the dead is Jesus' final offense to the Temple authorities and will lead to his execution on a cross.

When he leads the crowd to the cave/tomb of Lazarus, Jesus orders them to remove the stone that seals it. After they roll it back, he orders Lazarus to come out. Try to imagine the utter disbelief and astonishment of the crowd at this command. Lazarus, wrapped and bound in cloths, walks out of the darkness into the daylight. Out of the tomb-become-womb, he comes out, born again into hope. Jesus orders the people to unbind him.

I think this story is about a God who is calling us to come out from our self-made tombs into the fresh air and rejoin the community. It is about God's desire to make all things new through unbinding us from things that keep us less than alive. Do you know what binds you? It is not always easy to know. Sometimes others know better than we. Better not to do this alone

From Jesus' example, we learn that *our* compassion also has the power to unbind. Recently, I received a letter from an agency that serves those troubled in mind and spirit. The letter describes a young woman who was very depressed and suicidal. Over the course of time, as a result of the therapy they were able to provide, the young woman was re-born like Lazarus, receiving and taking for herself new life and mental vigor. The agency helped her out of her "tomb" and guided her back into the light. We too can serve with the compassion of Jesus, becoming his

voice of encouragement and his hands to unbind. Unbinding can be done in simple, everyday ways; a word of encouragement or counsel, a smile or handshake, or just listening with caring attention.

If the Lazarus' story is about the death and rebirth of one man, then Ezekiel's vision depicts the death and revival of an entire nation. Prior to the turn of the 6th century BCE, Ezekiel had railed against the religious-political establishment in Jerusalem. He warned of a disaster to come if the ruling class did not change their ways and obey God's law. He was not popular. But doom did come in the form of defeat by the Babylonian empire in 599 BCE. Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed and the privileged class of leaders was extirpated and put down in exile in Babylon. The people were devastated. They felt abandoned and punished by God. They lost all hope. When Ezekiel himself was also taken into captivity he changed from a prophet of calamity to a prophet of hope. He had a vision. He writes,

"The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them. There were very many bones lying in the valley and they were very dry."

Here is the valley of death. In my imagination, I conjure up the scene after a great battle or massacre. A searing desert sun scorches the place. These bones have a story to tell.

God questions Ezekiel, *"Can these bones live?"* The prophet wisely responds, *"Oh Lord, God, you know."* Just as Jesus speaks to the dead Lazarus, as if something would happen, the Lord commands Ezekiel to speak to the bones. Ezekiel speaks and tells the bones that they will live. Then the bones start to come together, sinews form; flesh comes to the bones and then skin. Imagine the clattering sound of all the bones coming together. The bodies in the valley now have everything but breath, the essential characteristic of life. Ezekiel obeys God's command saying, *"Come from the four winds, O breath, (Spirit, Ruach), and breathe upon these slain, that they may live... And the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."*

How was this surrealistic vision a prophecy of hope for the captive people in Babylon and for those left behind in the ruins of Jerusalem? In case there is any question about the meaning of the vision, God explains to Ezekiel, *"Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'" The people of Israel are in the valley of despair and see no future life for themselves. Again, the Lord addresses the prophet, his instrument of*

grace and empowerment, *“Therefore (Ezekiel) prophesy and say to them, ... I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ... I will put my spirit (breath) within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then (recalling their earlier failure) you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.”*

Wow! Can you imagine how these words might have sounded to a people who felt forgotten, crushed and hopeless? The message brings about the revival of not one man but of an entire community. Though no one saw it, where there was death there was also hope. Some might say that this is a great tale but hard to believe that it could happen today.

Several weeks after Hurricane Katrina the residents of Moss Point in Escatawpa, Mississippi, were reeling from the destruction and chaos caused by the ferocious storm. The tidal surge brought highly toxic mud from the Escatawpa River into their homes and churches. Moss Point is a small community of mostly black and very poor people. Their community is adjacent to a huge gas and oil refinery. The air is contaminated by the fumes from the plant and the river water has dioxin in it, a cancer-causing chemical. Before the hurricane, 95% of the residents were sick. One grandmother has five grandchildren with asthma who have been in and out of hospitals much of their young lives. Moss Point is a deadly place to live, even more so after the toxic sludge was deposited in their homes, leaving the ground itself highly contaminated. Because the residents were on the payroll of the offending corporation, they were afraid to speak out or stand up for themselves. They were like dry bones.

Enter Rev. Richard Young, the Pastor of the Greater First Baptist Church in Moss Point. In *RENEWAL: Stories from America's Religious Environmental Movement*, a film series we recently viewed and discussed here at St. John's, Pastor Young describes with great conviction and enthusiasm receiving a call from God.

“I was standing on the porch of the ruined church several weeks after Katrina, looking out at Moss Point and all the devastation, and suddenly, out of nowhere, I heard the Holy Spirit. He spoke to me and told me to call for a test of this environment. And I was just as happy as I could be. Lord, I said, with all these people you are speaking to little me... But he spoke to me and I moved with great energy.”

Young called in experienced chemist to take samples of the air, water and land. He conducted a health survey. He knew he had to do something. He held a town meeting in his church because people were

breathing death and didn't know it. He says, *"My goal was to get my brothers and sisters to stand up for themselves. ... The battle is not ours; it is God's. I think we put the motivational spirit into the people. Because of greed there was contamination, which is a sin against nature. Man did this; man has to pay."* He goes on to describe his vision for the future, *"I would like to have the homes and churches rebuilt and the contaminated soul removed. I think it is going to take 10-15 years."*

"Man, can these bones live?"

O Lord, you know."

Like Ezekiel, Pastor Young restores strength to a defeated and hopeless people. The future will not be easy but dry bones will get up breathe ... and maybe even dance.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." ⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹²Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will

bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.

John 11:1-45

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Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” ¹¹After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” ¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” ¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus

said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So 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 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.