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March 29, 2020  
Ezekiel 37: 1-14; John 11: 1-45

### Standing Together in the Disruption

Let us pray... Holy God – help us to hear the word your Still-speaking Spirit is saying to us for THIS day, for this moment, for this time. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all these gathered hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Well – here we are, church. Did you imagine life might have returned to normal by now?

Or maybe you're like me – you didn't think life would be normal, but you did think you had come around to this idea of physical distancing – you thought you had found some silver linings – you thought it wouldn't really be so bad...

And then this week happened. And suddenly it got hard.

Signs went up at your favorite hiking trails telling you to stay away.

You talked to your loved one who's still suiting up to serve in a hospital, doctor's office or grocery store and realized how frightened they are.

Feelings of impatience, frustration, anxiety, sorrow... seem to have increased. They've found a way to lodge right in your chest, waiting to creep up your throat when you don't have your feelings armor firmly in place.

Maybe that's not where you are...

But it's where I am.

Church – this week, I'm grieving. Some days I'm frightened. Everyday I'm anxious – because I don't have all the information.

I don't know how or when this is going to end.

I don't know when I'm going to get to hug you again.

And that's hard. Life has been disrupted. I'm grieving and perhaps you are too.

But if there's any kind of word for us RIGHT NOW in the midst of disruption – any vision to help us trust that there is life on the other side – it's this word from the prophet Ezekiel.

And it's our accompanying Gospel text – John, chapter 11.

The Raising of Lazarus.

Lazarus. The brother of Mary and Martha. Friend of Jesus.

At the start of the chapter, we hear about Mary and Martha.

They've sent word to Jesus who's holing up out in the wilderness – laying low from authorities who'd like to arrest him.

“Lord, he whom you love is ill.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus – please come, our brother, your friend, the one you love, is sick. Come. Come quickly. Heal him.

And so Jesus prepares to go to Bethany, the village where Lazarus and his sisters live.

Bethany is only two miles from Jerusalem, the heart of Judea, the heart of the region where Jesus is in the most danger.

His disciples wonder why he'd put himself at risk by heading back to Judea, but Jesus brushes them off.

Strangely, however, he doesn't go right away, he spends two more days where he is before he heads to Bethany.

Two days make all the difference. During that time, Lazarus dies.

No longer is he ill, no longer can his sisters, Mary and Martha count on Jesus to arrive just in time to heal him.

No, instead by the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus is dead and has been laid in the tomb for four days.

Understandably, these two broken-hearted, grieving sisters have some questions.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 11: 3

<sup>2</sup> John 11: 21

Why WEREN'T you here?

Why didn't you prevent this?

Stop this loss? Stop this suffering? End this pain?

God – Lord – why do you not prevent the pain and loss and suffering in this world?

Why must we experience it?

Why must we go through it to reach the other side?

Why is death, loss, grief, pain part of the plan? Why is it part of life?

As we stand today, together in the midst of a disruption – it is okay to ask that question.

What we cannot, should not, do is act like everything is normal.

That this loss, this disruption to life as we know it, isn't happening.

We have to grieve together. We have to stand together, even as we stand apart, and experience this disruption.

It's the only way through to the other side.

When Ezekiel receives his vision of the Valley of Dry Bones – he's in the thick of exile.

He was a prophet in Judea during the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, right during the critical and horrible years of the exile to Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem.

Ezekiel was one of those exiled – one who witnessed firsthand the terrible destruction and upheaval of life as he and his community had known it.

And it is out of that lived reality that he receives this vision from God.

A valley of dry bones.

Dry scattered bones with no hint of life left in them. An end to their story.

But then God speaks.

And God breathes. A great breathe – a great wind – coming from all four corners of the earth to bring life.

Bringing life where none had been just a moment before.

Restoring life, re-knitting together the bones, forming the sinews, the muscles, the little, massive miracles that give each us form, body, a way to move, a way to be in this world.

Ruach. Life-giving breath. Animating force. Coming when it seems all hope is lost.

“I will put my breath in you, and you shall live.”<sup>3</sup>

God will put God’s breathe in us and WE. SHALL. LIVE.

Friends, I believe there is life on the other side of this crisis.

And I believe we’re going to have to walk through it, we’re going to have to show up, we’re going to have to experience it, before we get there.

Jesus arrives in Bethany.

“Lord, if YOU had been here, my brother would not have died.”<sup>4</sup>

But Lazarus HAS died. His body has been laid in the tomb.

Jesus didn’t make it in time. The worst has happened. Mary and Martha have lost their brother, Jesus has lost a friend, one whom he loved.

And yet, the story doesn’t end here.

But nor does it speed immediately to the conclusion.

Instead, we get Jesus with Mary and Martha.

His friends – two sisters – wondering why he didn’t take their pain away. Prevent it from happening at all.

Together, they gather and walk to the tomb.

To see where Lazarus’ body has been laid.

And there – Jesus began to cry.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 37:14

<sup>4</sup> John 11:32

<sup>5</sup> John 11:35

Our God, our giver of life, our creator, weeps with us.

In the midst of heartbreak, loss and grief – our God weeps with us.

Shoulder to shoulder, we grieve together. We let ourselves feel the loss, we sit in this discomfort, and we learn to experience disruption.

I heard Brene Brown say this week, “Love is the last thing we need to ration right now.”

Love looks like action. And it looks like grieving.

It looks like living in this disrupted world WITH our neighbors, WITH our communities, not separated from them.

Don’t misunderstand me – of course, I mean physically separated from them. That’s how we keep each other safe right now. But DON’T separate your heart from your neighbor.

Let their loss be your loss. If they are struggling, help to carry their burden. Stand together.

Because it is with community that we stay strong during times of crisis.

With community, we’ll all have a chance to break down.

With community, we’ll all have a chance to stand strong.

With community, we’ll witness the love that is God’s life-giving breath.

After a time, Jesus rises from his weeping, and comes before the tomb. He calls for the stone to be taken away (Martha rightfully questions such a strange decision) and then...

Jesus prays.

And then he cries out, “Lazarus, come out!”<sup>6</sup>

And Lazarus comes. Hand and feet still bound in the clothing of his burial, his face still wrapped in a cloth.

“Unbind him and let him go.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John 11:43

<sup>7</sup> John 11:44

Lazarus walks again. But his community – his sisters – his friends must help him to remove the trappings, the bindings of death, before he can fully move into his new present.

Church – when this crisis is over, many of us will still be walking around in the trappings of death.

We will have to remove those before we enter into new life.

The trappings of a struggling and overwhelmed healthcare system that isn't available to all of our neighbors.

The trappings of an economy that creates the illusion of scarcity and privileges wealth over all else.

The trappings of a political system so addicted to power and discord that the ability to lead is utterly compromised.

We will have to remove the bindings of death to move forward together, as a community, as neighbors, towards life.

God's rousing call, God's life-giving breath will come for us.

We will be invited to walk into a future, which so far, we're only dreaming of.

But don't forget, dreaming is planning.

So let us grieve. And let us dream dreams. And let us be prepared to unbind one another from the trappings of death when God beckons.

Amen.

### Benediction

Friends, I'm going to say a few more words and then give you a blessing.

Tim will play the piano for our sending song – and you're invited to stay on this call, to grab more coffee, take a bathroom break and then join us if you'd like for a little fellowship hour.

So, this may sound strange, but my hope, my prayer, for us, as a community, as a world, is that none of us make it out of this crisis untouched.

Because many of us will NOT emerge whole – the losses will be real, the grief and pain, significant.

And it may, in the weeks to come, it will be tempting to shut down – it will be tempting to do all YOU can to make sure you emerge untouched by this crisis.

But many of us are not control. And we will not be able to control the outcome – help sure, but control, no.

We, as a collective, are going to be broken-hearted by this.

And to do our best to come out of this crisis whole, untouched by the pain, is to stand apart from our community.

It's to choose hard-heartedness. And as a friend reminded me this week, "It's better to be broken-hearted than hardhearted."

We must choose the way of the breaking heart.

The way of disruption. Together.

Because this I know for sure:

Out of this disruption, God will draw new life.

God's life-giving breath, God's rousing call, will come to us again.

And that will make us whole. In a new and important way.

And in the meantime, right now, God is grieving too.

As you enter this week, take this blessing:

May God give you grace  
Never to sell yourself short,  
Grace to risk something big for something good,  
And grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous  
For anything but truth and  
Too small for anything but love. Amen.

Go in peace.