

Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45
Fifth Sunday of Lent
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Mortal, Can these bones live? O Lord, You know. There are places in us that can feel like a valley of dry bones. Not poetic. Not metaphor. But real. Places in our lives where something has dried up. Where something has ended. Where something feels beyond repair. Grief that does not resolve. Relationships that fracture. Parts of ourselves we have buried just to survive. And the question comes again: Mortal, can these bones live? Not will things get a little better. Not will time pass and soften this. But: Can life come out of this?

In Ezekiel, this vision is given to a people in exile. Israel has been conquered by Babylon. Jerusalem has been destroyed. The temple is gone. They are not just discouraged. They believe their story is over. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost." And God does not argue with their diagnosis. God takes Ezekiel into the valley and lets him see it for himself. Bones. Dry bones. And then God asks the question: Mortal, can these bones live? And Ezekiel gives the only honest answer: O Lord, you know. And then something astonishing happens. God does not remove the bones. God does not replace them. God brings them back. Bone to bone. Sinew. Flesh. And then breath.

This is not a ghost story. This is not about escaping the body. This is about full embodiment. God's vision is not to rescue us out of life. God's vision is to restore life where it seems life could not be. Flesh on bones. Breath in lungs. Life where there was none. And that matters. Because many of us have learned to survive by leaving parts of ourselves and our stories behind. By numbing. By disconnecting, dissociating. By going quiet in places where it hurt too much to stay. But God says: I am not calling you away from your life. I am calling you back into it. I am calling you deeper. And that breath, that life, is not something far away. It is already closer to us than we think.

In today's Gospel, John tells us this story with such care. Lazarus has been dead 4 days. In the ancient world, that mattered. There was a belief that the soul lingered near the body for 3 days. By the 4th day, death was undeniable. Final. And when Jesus arrives, Martha says what so many of us have said: *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* That is not theology. That is grief. I have prayed that prayer maybe you have too. *Lord, if you had been here.*

My friend Jeffrey, queer, Black, talented, brilliant, one of my closest friends for over 30 years, died of a drug overdose just before his 60th birthday. In the last years of his life, he pushed people away.

Including me. We had not spoken in 3 years. And I have asked myself more than once: Was there something I could have done differently? Something I could have said? *Lord, if you had been here.* And my sweet, kind, gentle giant of a nephew John. 38 years old. I saw him at his wedding, full of joy. And 3 months later, he was gone. And I do not understand that. And I do not believe God caused that. But I have said it: *Lord, if you had been here.*

And here is what the Gospel gives us. Before Jesus does anything. Before the miracle. Jesus weeps. He stands there, in front of a sealed tomb with people he loves, and he breaks open. He does not explain it away. He does not rush past it. He stands in front of death, and he feels it. And for a moment, there is no answer-only grief. Which means: The miracle does not erase the pain of the moment. And if you are grieving, you are not outside of God. You are standing exactly where Jesus stands. John's entire Gospel builds toward this moment. It begins with water turned into wine. Then healing after healing. Just 2 chapters earlier, the man born blind received his sight and the blind man says, this has never been done before. And now: Jesus goes one step further. Not healing. Not restoration. But calling someone out of death itself. And in a moment that seals his own death, Jesus speaks life into Lazarus. Because this is the turning point. From this moment on, the decision is made. Life for Lazarus will lead to death for Jesus. When Jesus approaches the tomb, they warn him: There is a stench. That detail matters. Because it tells the truth. This is not sanitized. This is not clean. This is what death actually looks like. And if we are honest, we know something about that. What is the stench we keep sealed? What have we learned to live with that we do not want to name? Addictions. To substances. To control. To money. To power. To ways of coping that are slowly suffocating us. And underneath all of that, something even deeper. Not just the things we do. But a separation. A distance from the Source of life itself. We might even call that sin. Not simply bad behavior. But a kind of living disconnection. Like bones cut off from breath. Like a body cut off from life. What have we rolled a stone over and decided is better left untouched?

And it is not just our personal lives. It is the world we are living in. There is a kind of chaos right now. A kind of instability. Leadership that can feel unpredictable, sometimes even indefensible. Decisions that affect real lives. Real bodies. Real futures. And it can begin to feel like everything is unraveling. But Scripture is very clear about something. God's ability to bring life is not threatened by chaos. Because the Bible is full of moments that look beyond repair. Exile. Occupation. Death. And still: God asks: Mortal, can these bones live? There is a difference between the unending, steadfast, ever flowing love of God and the fragile egos of kings. Empires rise and fall. Leaders come and go. But God keeps speaking life.

So when we gather here, we are not here to escape the world. We are not here to pretend that policies do not matter or that suffering is not real. We are here because we believe something deeper: That

even now, God is still working. God is still speaking. And what happens here is meant to move through us. Into the world. As hands that heal. As voices that tell the truth. As lives that refuse to cooperate with hatred.

Hope does not arrive because one perfect leader appears. Hope comes through a people. A people bound together. Courageous together. We have seen it before. We will see it again. Jesus stands at the tomb. And he calls out with a loud voice: **Lazarus, come out.** And here is the truth. That call is not just for Lazarus. It is for every place in us that has learned to live buried. Come out. Come out of hiding. Come out of shame. Come out of addiction. Come out of fear. Come out of the story that has convinced you that this is as alive as you will ever be. Come out. But we need to be honest about something. Coming out is not always easy. The poet Mary Karr says, When you have been in the dark a long time, the light is blinding. You do not come out whistling. You come out disoriented. Overwhelmed. Everything looks different. Because it is.

And then there is one more detail. Lazarus comes out. But he is still wrapped. Still bound. And Jesus says: Unbind him and let him go. God brings life. But we help set each other free. This is what the Church is meant to be. Not a place where we pretend we are fine. But a place where we help each other live. Where we hold each other steady. Where we tell the truth. A people bound together unbinding each other. This is what recovery communities understand so well. People come in broken. Dysregulated. Bound. And slowly, through shared presence, they find their way back to life. Not everyone makes it. But no one is meant to do it alone. And maybe the hardest thing in the world is to ask for that kind of help. But that is often the moment the stone begins to roll away.

From the very beginning, God speaks life. Let there be light. And there is light. In Ezekiel, God speaks to the bones. And breath enters them. At the tomb, Jesus speaks. And Lazarus comes out. And John tells us: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And still dwells among us. Which means this is not just something that happened. This is something that is still happening. God is still speaking. Still calling. Still bringing life out of death. Still standing at the edge of every tomb and calling us by name. And so the question is not only what God has done. The question is what God is doing now. How are we the Word made flesh now? How do we speak life into each other, into dead places, into a world that has learned to expect death? God is still speaking

“Calvary, Can these bones live?”