

Who Could Stand

March 26, 2023

John 11:1-6, 11-27, 38-45

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But 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." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was...

¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

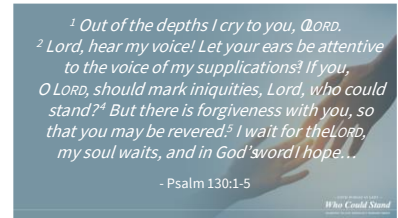
²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and²⁶ everyone who lives and believes in 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.” ...

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.



This week the lectionary readings are so connected, so intertwined that God surely had a hand in how these writings that come over the course of almost a thousand years speak to one another. We begin with Psalm 130, where we join the psalmist in offering up a cry from a place of distress that flows into forgiveness, hope, and trust.

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. ² Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! ³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? ⁴ But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. ⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope;



⁶ my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. ⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with the LORD is great power to redeem. ⁸ It is God who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

The Psalm begins with a cry out from the depths. It is a place that we have all been. We have all cried out to God in confession, in repentance, in a time of need. As the Psalm progresses, it moves towards grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The psalmist asks as we must ask: If God kept track of our failures, who could stand? The truth is, we could not. If God held everything against us, if God kept an account of our wrongs and weighed out our worth, what hope would any of us have? So we, like the psalmist, express our gratitude for God's forgiveness and for grace. Without these, we would be like those dry bones that Ezekiel saw scattered across the valley. Without forgiveness and grace, we would not ever come to know the power of reconciliation and redemption and resurrection. As we prepare to delve into these themes, let us begin with a word of prayer...



We began worship with the opening verses from Ezekiel 37.

Turn with me to this passage as we continue to explore this wonderful story – one of my favorites. First, a little context.

Ezekiel is a prophet of God living in the time of exile in



Babylon. He prophesies for about 20 years. The last 16 chapters of Ezekiel cover the future of Israel. If we back up just a little bit from this week's passage, back to chapter 36, verses 33-38, we hear God's promise of hope, of restoration, of new life. These verses echo Psalm 130, where we heard God's promises of cleansing Israel from all iniquities. Isaiah 36 speaks of a total restoration of the land and people. That which had been devastated will be made whole. In verse 35 we read that this desolate land will *"become like the Garden of Eden."* This vision cast by God provides a great contrast to the scene that Ezekiel sees next – a valley full of dry bones. So we must ask: Why did God give these words of great hope just before bringing Ezekiel to the valley?

Sometimes God casts a vision of hope first because the people's present reality is so bleak. At the end of chapter 36 God lifts up the spirits of the people so that they will be able to hear the reality of their present condition. In verse 4 God asks, *"Mortal, can these bones live?"* Ezekiel knows that this a question for God alone. So, in response, he says, *"O Lord GOD, you know."* In verses 5-10, God reveals that there is a plan for good as God directs Ezekiel to prophesy to these dry bones. As Ezekiel prophesies, the bones begin to rattle as they come together. Then tendons and flesh cover the bones. But there is no life; there is no breath in these dead bodies. Continuing, Ezekiel prophesies, *"Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."* The breath of God, the Spirit, comes, filling these bodies, bringing life.

They stood on their feet, *“a vast multitude.”* What a vision of God’s power to restore and to resurrect. We turn next to hope as we read verses 11-14.

“¹¹ Then 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.’

¹² Therefore prophesy, 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. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I 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.”

The people living in exile were tired. Their faith was dry, and they were without hope. As I said earlier, when we opened with Psalm 130, we’ve all been here as individuals. Israel’s faith was as dead as those very dry bones covering the valley floor. They felt as if they were living with two feet already in the grave. Have you been there? Do you know folks who feel like they are there? In this place, in the valley, we often ask what the psalmist asked earlier: “God, who can stand?” If you feel like you’re there, hear and claim these words of promise and hope found in the middle of verses 13 and 14: *“I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.”* If you know someone who is there, share these words with them.



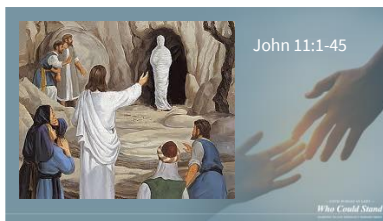
Even though we can read these words of hope and promise as personal in nature, this passage is to the “*whole house of Israel*.” It is to the whole community of faith. Therefore the promise is corporate as well. Yes, these words speak to us as individuals, and also to us as churches and as denominations, just as they spoke to individuals and to the nation of Israel. At all levels, God can revive us no matter how dry we feel. From the individual to the whole world, God can breathe new life into us, no matter how much we are gasping for air, no matter how great our sorrow feels.

I don’t know if you ever sense or feel this, but at times I feel a sorrow over the state of the church. Sometimes it comes from the denominational squabble that we United Methodists are in the throes of. Sometimes this fighting feels like a heavy weight upon me. But more often, when I feel like I am in the valley, it comes from the overall state of the big church. Sometimes, from the big picture, it feels like the church is on the way out. On those hard days, it feels like the big “c” church is sitting in a valley of dry bones. It is the valley of what once was, the valley of what our expectations used to be.

And yet even in what often feels like the valley, we remain the church. We hold onto hope and forgiveness. We offer these to a world in need. I hold onto hope and forgiveness. I try to offer these to a world in need. And God reminds me again and again that we are right where we are as the church because this is right where God wants us to be. In God’s own way, we are asked, “*Mortal, can these bones live?*” Yes, only God knows.

I believe that God has big plans for the church and for the kingdom of God. God is not done with us. So we move forward in faith and out into the world, trusting in God's promises of reconciliation and redemption and resurrection.

Trust is at the center of our faith. In our Luke readings this week we meet the widow who put in two small copper coins. In Luke 21:4 Jesus tells us, *"She out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."* This widow had drawn a hard lot in life – much harder than all of us sitting here today. Two copper coins were all she had. These coins, believed to be *"lepta,"* were a fraction of a day's wages. Imagine how deep her valley must have felt most of the time. Yet with faith in God, she drops them into the offering box. Her faith in God led her to give all that she had, trusting fully in the God who walked with her every day.



Turn with me to John 11, where trust in the God who offers reconciliation, restoration, and resurrection life is on full display. Professor Robert Brewer sums up the overall

message of this passage this way: "Here Jesus demonstrates in the physical realm the spiritual realities described in the other passages." He is speaking of Ezekiel 37 and Psalm 130 and Romans 8. In John 11 we find the story of Lazarus, the story of Jesus' power even over death. Lazarus' story is a bookend resurrection story to Jesus' story of resurrection. Lazarus coming back to life here on earth points towards Jesus' victory over the grave and to the promise of our eternal resurrection too.

As our John passage opens, Mary and Martha cry out from their valley. Their brother is gravely ill. They send word to Jesus, saying, *“Lord, he whom you love is ill.”* They cry out, trusting that Jesus will come. They believe that Jesus has the power to heal Lazarus. But Jesus delays, waiting two days to begin the journey to Bethany. The wait is intentional. When the disciples question Jesus’ decision to wait, he explains, saying, *“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.”* Jesus already knows the rest of the story. But Mary and Martha do not. They wait and wait. Jesus does not come. Lazarus dies and is laid in the tomb. They are covered in grief and sorrow and pain. With that weight upon them, they too perhaps ask, “Who could stand?”

When news comes that Jesus is nearby, it is Martha that first goes out to greet him. She says to him, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”* This is partly the faith of the widow who gave all she had and partly the faith of the psalmist whose *“soul waits upon the Lord.”* It is part belief and part unspoken question. Martha believes that Lazarus will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. This is a tenant of the Jewish faith.

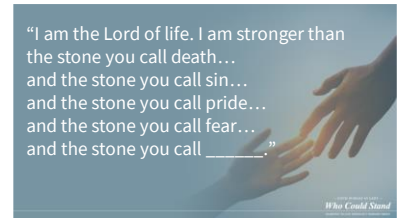
Jesus then goes beyond her unspoken question as he declares, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”*

Jesus is claiming the power over life and death not just on earth, but in all of eternity as well. This is a profound truth of our faith. Pushing on, Jesus asks Martha, *“Do you believe this?”* This is a question we all have to wrestle with. In the deepest of valleys, we too must answer whether or not we believe that Jesus has power over both our life and our death. Martha responds in faith: *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*

As Mary and a crowd come to where Jesus is, Mary expresses what Martha expressed: Lord, if you’d have been here... After standing beside his two grieving friends and crying right alongside them, Jesus moves to the tomb. He asks for the stone to be taken away. Martha protests – it has been four days. And then, tying back into his claim of being the resurrection and the life, Jesus asks her, *“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”* After a prayer inviting everyone there into God’s presence right alongside Jesus, he cries out, *“Lazarus, come out!”* The dead man walks out of the grave and back into life. Lazarus coming back to life reveals to us that Jesus has the power to lift us out of any valley, to help us stand no matter what.

We can be like Martha was in her moment of questioning, can’t we? We can see a stone and think that it is immovable. We can think that it has been there too long or that is too large to ever be removed. Until Jesus says, take away the stone. It is Jesus’ way of asking us what he asked Martha: Do you believe? Do you believe that I have the power to remove any stone? It is Jesus’ way of asking if we’ll give all that we have to live on, trusting that he has the power to then provide for our every need. It is Jesus’ way of asking if we are willing to surrender everything and anything to his power.

Jesus says to you and to me what he said to Mary and to Martha and to all who were there that day with them: “I am the Lord of life. I am stronger than the stone you call death... and the stone you call sin... and the stone you call pride... and the stone you call fear... and the stone you call ____.” Maybe your stone fits in the blank. What is your stone? Whatever it is, yes, Jesus is Lord over that too.



Jesus is telling us that we do not need to live in fear, that we do not need to limit our lives, that we do not need to limit how we live in the world. He is inviting us to allow him to take away all that stands in our way of embracing the abundant and beautiful and joyful life that he offers. My friends, surrendering to Jesus, to the way of the cross, is the only way that we can stand in this life. Turning to the one who can take away all the stones, to the one who will help us through whatever valley we find ourselves in, turning to Jesus Christ, we can stand faithfully. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you prepare your heart for Holy Week, where is (or are) your growing edge(s) of faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Where is your faith dry? How and why does our faith become dry? The remedy? Prayer!!
- 3) *Study*. Read John 12:1-11. As Jesus prepares for his triumphal entry, this scene unfolds. When have you received a gift as you headed into a difficult task? How did it affect your journey?