

## Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent – March 26, 2023

Ezekiel 37:1-14 | Psalm 130 | Romans 8:6-11 | John 11:1-45

### **Kelton Riley**

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Recently, I was having a conversation with a fellow seminarian about the many curious interactions that one has with people in the line of ministry. She observed, “There sure are a lot of strange, strange people in the world.” I nodded and added, “Yes. And most of them go to church.” Beloved of God, I hope that you are not too alarmed to hear this: If you are here in this church today, you might be, well, a bit strange. You might *believe* in strange things, things like incarnation, resurrection, abundant life. You might *do* strange things like coming to church instead of sleeping in, speaking kindness in the face of unkindness, or carrying hope in an increasingly cynical world. To be a Christian in the modern world is to *be* a bit strange. But take heart. This strangeness is a gift. And it is especially a gift today when the lectionary has given us some strange, strange readings.

Our scripture readings today each contain the tension of tremendous paradox. Each of the readings, from Ezekiel to Romans to John are *saturated* with death. Death, death, death. And yet each, from Ezekiel to Romans to John, preach and prophesy to life, life, life. It seems like an opposition too distant to reconcile. Amidst so much death, how can one dare to find hope for life? They are opposites, enemies, even. To find them together doesn’t make sense—it smacks of nonsense. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that this paradox points to a truth that is *beyond* sense—to a truth that transcends the limits of our mortal, human sensibility.

We see this paradox of sensibility within the reading from Ezekiel, where the LORD addresses the prophet as “mortal.” For a mortal is a living being who is subject to death. For all of us, our very existence is held in tension with our non-existence. For while we are all alive in the present, there was a time in the past when we were not yet and a time in the future when we will again not be. In his own observations of the valley of dry bones before him, Ezekiel perceived through his mortal senses the signs of death. He saw all around him bones bleached

by the sun. He heard the crunch of grit and gravel, of brittle, ossified decay under his feet. He smelled the musty scent of dry, dusty death with each breath he took.

Likewise, in Gospel of John, Jesus, in his own incarnate flesh, observes the signs of death in the wake of Lazarus's passing. He felt the grief of his beloved friends' mourning, so much that he himself wept. He heard the heavy grind of stone against stone as they cleared the entrance of the tomb. He smelled the stench of four days of decay that had accumulated around Lazarus's corpse. There was no denying that present reality: Lazarus is dead. In Ezekiel's valley, those bones had no breath in them. In Paul's letter to the Romans, to set the mind on the flesh is death. As Christians, our faith does not call us to a toxic, naïve optimism that would have us deny the reality of death. To the contrary, our scriptures and our own lived experience set death ever before us. *Lazarus is dead. The bones have no breath. Mortal, you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* Death is our present, and inescapable reality.

Our hope is not in a God who denies the reality of death. Our hope is not in a God who would shield us from the reality of death. Our hope is in a God who strengthens us to look death square in the face and *see it conquered*. "Mortal, can these bones live?" Good sense tells us they cannot. All that *our* limited mortal senses can see and hear and smell and feel tells us that these bones cannot live. And so, wisely, the prophet Ezekiel responds, "Oh Lord God... *you know*." For God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God's senses transcend the temporal and finite bounds that limit our own senses. God, "who has raised Christ from the dead will give life to our mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwells in us" (Romans). Our God looks death in the face and says, "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live." Our God looks death in the face and says, "You shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live." Our God looks death in the face and says, "Lazarus, come out!"

In our present reality, we remain this side of the fully realized Kingdom of God. We live in that curious paradox where the Kingdom is at hand and yet still seems so far off. We have life abundantly, and yet death remains all around us. The threat of death seems ever-present to our senses. Many hear the political polarization in our country and lament that civility is dying. Many see the reality of declining church membership in the West and worry that the church is dying. Many feel the growing climate crisis and fear that the planet is dying. Our senses will not allow us to ignore the reality of death in our midst. There may be days when your very soul

feels as dusty and brittle as dry bones. To live in such a world and still live in hope is truly a strange, strange thing.

And this strange, strange power is within you, for “you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Romans). You are given the power to wait upon the LORD, “more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning” (Psalm 130), to know that even from within your own grave you will hear the loud voice of your Lord crying “Mortal, come out!” For Christ, who is the resurrection and the life, has conquered death, transforming it into a gateway to resurrection. When the world speaks death through harsh indifference, discrimination, and cruelty, you like Ezekiel, are called to *prophesy to life*—calling the breath to “breathe upon the slain, that they may live.” You, mortal, are given the strange and marvelous power to speak life! Let us then speak the life that is Christ into a world that is just dying to hear some Gospel.