

Ezekiel 37:1-14 ~ John 11:1-44  
*Seeking: Can These bones Lives?*<sup>i</sup>  
 Fifth Sunday in Lent ~ March 26, 2023  
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Scripture Reading*

The rocking chair is gone. Last week I invited you to relax into a smooth rocking motion as we prepared to hear the story of Jesus healing the man born blind. You may recall, it was brought to life by several of our very own talented FPC actors. With their help, we got to see the miracle, the humor, and the irony in that story. But today's gospel story is different. Instead of a rocking chair, I was thinking about setting up a roller coaster here in the sanctuary but didn't have time to get that approved by Building & Grounds and the Session in time for this sermon. So, you will just have to imagine your favorite coaster.

We do have some great ones right here in Wisconsin. There's "Zippin Pippin" at Bay Beach Amusement Park. (Apparently it was a favorite of Elvis Presley back in the day.) Or maybe you prefer the four coasters at Mount Olympus, Wisconsin Dells. There's "Zeus" (with its 85-foot drop, the ride has been compared to an earthquake or a car crash. And we pay to ride this thing?), and there's the "Cyclops" and the "Hades 360." That one takes you 60 miles an hour underground into an 800-foot tunnel. And then you travel upside down on an inversion twist, *without* shoulder restraints. I don't know about you, but I'm kind of wishing for that rocking chair about now... Too late for that.

Time to jump on "Hades 360" since its name leans theological, as we prepare to ride the roller coaster of a story in John 11. It starts with the death of Lazarus, moves to Jesus' raising of Lazarus, and ends by accelerating the plot to kill Jesus, "So from that day on, they planned to put him to death (John 11:52). In a way, the arc of this story is kind of like the 4<sup>th</sup> coaster at the Dells, "Pegasus" which is known as a "big kiddie coaster." I say this because John 11 is recognized as a warm-up, a precursor, for the real dead drop into hades and back, the death and resurrection of Christ, that most wild ride of all we will take beginning next Sunday.

Well friends, while I was blathering on, we made it through that long line, now it's our turn to get on board. So, buckle your seat belt, attach your shoulder restraint, get ready to lean on the lap bar. If you have a GoPro Hero11, fire it up. The rest of us can open the lenses of our eyes and hearts to witness the ups and downs, the twists and turns of the coaster ride God has for us right now in this reading of God's Holy Word, as it is found in John 11:1-44.

*Sermon*

Lauren Winner (author and scholar) tells the story of twelve-year-old Julian who decided she could not be confirmed. When she told her father, who also happened to be a pastor, about this decision, she explained she couldn't go through with confirmation because she wasn't sure she could promise to believe *everything* she was supposed to believe *forever*. Her father responded: "What you promise when you are confirmed is not that you will believe this forever. What you promise is that this is the story you will wrestle with forever."<sup>ii</sup> What a great answer!

I'm sure I would not have come up with such a wise response like that (especially if it was my own daughter).

There is certainly *plenty* to wrestle with in the story we just heard about the raising of Lazarus. Anybody feel a little motion-sick from the ups and downs, the twists and turns of this roller-coaster of a story? I am prone to motion-sickness, so that's where my mind and stomach go. Certainly, the issues raised (along with Lazarus himself) exceed the bounds of one sermon. As we gather our wits and our equilibrium coming off this ride, let's think for a moment. What was your favorite part of that ride? What was your least favorite part? And what parts are you still pondering or chewing on?

I wonder about this Lazarus whom Jesus loved so much. If they were best buds, why do we never hear another word about his friend in John or in any gospel? And why on earth did Jesus wait two days before heading to respond to this emergency? By the time Jesus and his disciples get there Lazarus is very dead. His emotional response is difficult to translate precisely. So, we are left to wonder a bit there too. It is written that Jesus becomes *deeply disturbed and troubled* or the Greek could also be translated he was *filled with anger and indignation*. Perhaps both were true. Emotions are thick that way. Especially anger. Martha and Mary were certainly ticked off. They both told him: "If you had been here my brother wouldn't have died." A more accurate translation is actually "My brother never would have died."<sup>iii</sup> Everyone was upset and angry. But I wonder, knowing that he had the power to raise Lazarus, and would soon exercise that power, why was he so upset? Right before he was about to reveal God's power and glory in a spectacular way.

And then comes the favorite verse for confirmation students, and other Bible memory contests, the shortest verse in the Bible, two words: "Jesus wept." (KJV, John 11:35). The shortest verse not only to memorize, but to take to heart. Friends: We have a God who cried salt tears, just like we do. Even in the Gospel of John, where Jesus is portrayed without any emotions attributed to him except in this verse, and in 13:21, as he told his disciples that one of them would betray him. In John we have this gem of a verse. "Jesus wept." And God still cries with us.

Many of us were raised to not trust or even acknowledge our emotions. Especially we stalwart Midwesterners. However, emotions are part of God's design for humanity. This roller coaster of a story is a prime example. And it offers an important lesson hope you will take home with you today. As Kyle Bender, puts it: "**Emotions are not meant to be fixed; they are meant to be felt.**"<sup>iv</sup> In his article about the emotions of young people, he goes on: "if emotions are meant to be felt, not fixed, then our first task in understanding the reality of young people is to listen. Our goal is not to take away their negative emotions, though we might like to, but to validate them." And I would expand this beyond young people, to all people. Like Jesus did in this story, we are called rather than being in a hurry to rush and "fix" them, to stop the pain (which we can't anyway), let's do what Jesus did. Be still, and still for a minute with them in the grief."

Friends, with all the pain, the hurt, the death we experience firsthand, and secondhand the trauma all around us and in the news, can these bones live? The answer in both of our stories is "yes." Although, perhaps honestly, all you see around you is a valley of very dry bones: the bones of old grief, old loss lingering, taunting, haunting you. The Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel comprise the bones of collective grief of God's chosen people exiled in Babylon. Old, dried, ossified grief. At the tomb of Lazarus, the communal weeping and mourning, perhaps Lazarus' friends were there sitting shiva, what we see is fresh, raw grief. All kinds of grief break our hearts. But then with God's breath, and with Jesus word, from death comes life. New life. God's glory. Wilder than any roller coaster ride!

Where do you see God's glory in the everyday rhythms of life? Deadness coming to life?. Where do you see God bringing life out of death and despair. Healing where there is hurt and brokenness. That is the power of resurrection that we see in the Valley of Dead Bones, and at the grave in Bethany. God calls us to enter fully into the grief, the loss, the anger, the hurt. To feel those feelings and to know that is not the end. At the same time, we look for God's glory in every person and in every situation, because our faith tells us that love wins, ultimately. That God brings life out of death and despair. No matter how deep the valley or seismic the crack.

That is our work here, as the body of Christ, we call FPC. It's not always fun or easy. Nor is it always clear what God is calling us to do. And yet, friends, here are just a few examples of where I see the resurrection life here in and among us. In small ways and large.

- Like right now at this very moment, hosting the Mexican Mobile Consulate and yesterday, bringing free and accessible legal help to our neighbors who live and work right here among and with us. Documentation they need to open up new life and new possibilities.
- I marvel daily at God's glory at work in our refugee resettlement cosponsor team #3, for over the past seven months and I mean WORK, beyond the telling.
- I see God's glory every time we host a funeral luncheon for a loved one, right here in our Fellowship Hall.
- I see God's glory when we march in the annual Pride Parade and show up at that event with a Table that speaks love and sells Rainbow polls.
- I see God's glory when we loan out medical equipment by the boatload every month, helping one post-surgical, mending body and their family at a time: wheelchair, walker, shower chair. Being able to take a shower unassisted after surgery—that can feel like resurrection right there!
- I see God's glory every Spring in the planting of every plot in our community garden; and this Spring in the 100 trees you all adopted and planted almost a year ago.
- I saw God's glory last week in our "Can-tastic" Labyrinth made of hundreds of cans to feed hungry people here in our community, a project led by our Youth, that so many of you, of all ages took the chance to walk, last Sunday.
- Looking beyond our local context, I also see God's glory across our country and our world through our participation in the One Great Hour of Sharing offering, help already in place to send to Silver City, Mississippi, reeling from a Tornado that touched down on

Friday; to helping people all around the world who lack access to sustainable food, water, sanitation, education, and opportunity.

Notice the pattern emerging? In the roller coaster of life, there are steep ascents, sudden drops, 360 spins, and dark tunnels. We don't know when or why, much of the time. There's just so much we don't know. And even *more* that we find hard to believe. Like Martha, she could see and believe in her Lord standing there, and said, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ." But perhaps she wasn't too sure she could believe what Jesus was saying about never dying. None of us gets it completely if we are honest. Not on this side. But, like Martha we *can* see, we *can* feel, we can *hear* our Savior who says, *Come. Come to me. I've been where you are. Yes, it's hard. Yes, it hurts. And yes, there's hope. And I am here with you now. I get you. I got you. Forever.* I will end this sermon with a prayer written by Ted Loder, titled: "I Teeter on the Brink of Endings." Let us pray:

*O God of endings, you promised to be with me always,  
even to the end of time.*

*Move with me now in these occasions of last things,  
of shivering vulnerabilities and letting go:*

*letting go of parents gone, past gone,  
friends going, old self growing; letting go of children grown;  
needs outgrown, prejudices ingrown, illusions over grown;  
letting go of swollen grudges and shrunken loves.*

*Be with me in my end of things,  
my letting go of dead things,  
dead ways, dead words, dead self I hold so tightly,  
defend so blindly,  
fear losing so frantically.*

*I teeter on the brink of endings: some anticipated, some resisted, some inevitable, some surprising, most painful; and the mystery of them quiets me to awe.*

*In silence, Lord, I feel now the curious blend of grief and gladness in me  
over the endings that the ticking and whirling of things bring;  
and I listen for your leading to help me faithfully move on through the fear  
of my time to let go so the timeless may take hold of me.<sup>v</sup>*

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<sup>i</sup> The title and sermon themes for this series, *Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith*. A series created for Lent-Easter Year A, are from A Sanctified Art, LLC.

<sup>ii</sup> Lynn Jost, "In the Lectionary, March 26 Fifth Sunday in Lent," *The Christian Century*, March 2023, p.27.

<sup>iii</sup> Wilda Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*, Year W (Church Publishing Inc.: New York, NY, 2021), p. 185.

<sup>iv</sup> Kyle Bender, "Loss, Lament, and the Emotions of Young People Today," *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2023, pp. 43 – 49.]

<sup>v</sup> Ted Loder, "I Teeter on the Brink of Endings," *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, (Luramedia: San Diego, CA, 1984), p. 77.