

Lent 5A, March 29th, 2020 SERMON

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

Lazarus 2020

Loving God, may these human thoughts lead us to the Written Word, and to the Living Word,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

It was very tempting for me to preach about *Ezekiel's Bones* today, especially thinking of broken (now healed) radial heads, in my elbow (it sounds like something in my car's engine!).

Each reading today cries out with God's power over death – physical and spiritual death. The God who breathes God's Spirit into us that we may have fulness of life.

But in this current world, where our lives are changed every 5 minutes, the story of Lazarus was calling.

Jesus, under threat of arrest, had retreated to safety, across the Jordan.

There, he received a message from his beloved friends, Mary and Martha: "our brother Lazarus is ill"

2020, Covid 19: We hear the news, at first coming from afar – people are ill. We're concerned. Jesus, we need you!

Jesus does nothing, but makes a rather obscure statement about it being all "for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." After a couple of days, he tells his disciples to pack up – they're all going to Judea. Uh oh, they say – dangerous territory – you know they want to kill you over there. Jesus continues in his somewhat irritating abstruse way - We're off to "wake up" Lazarus.

2020, Covid 19: What's he doing? Things are going from bad to worse all over the place. It's a whole new plague we're not going to be able to get way from! You'd think he'd be very ready to step in quickly, or at least make it clear what he's doing. Does he really care, or not? It's out of control, and he can stop it..... Can't he?

Jesus and company arrive finally outside Bethany, to be told that Lazarus is cold in the grave. Martha shoots straight: "Where were you? If you had been here, my brother would not have died". Come on, you can still do something, surely! Jesus says Lazarus will "rise again" – Martha says, *sure, on the last day*. Jesus, again responding obscurely, says that he (Jesus) is '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. Do you believe this?'

2020, Covid 19: Yes, we know; it's not all about the "last day" – he's the one who is our Lord now, giving us life now, and he's our Lord into all eternity. Death isn't the end, it's a step into on-going life. But we're faced with the impossible and dire threat to life right now; this is unchangeable reality; we have no control; we don't always feel "the peace of God"; in fact there are times when we feel quite overwhelmed.

Mary now comes to him, followed by the crowds of fellow Jews who had come to mourn with them. Jesus is deeply agitated. There's some who are moved by Jesus' presence; others are critical and angry (v37)

2020, Covid 19: He's here! At last! Where have you been? Why so long? It's too late! Too late! It's all out of hand. Death has come! Nothing is able to stop it, and we're afraid!

Jesus comes to the tomb, and asks that the stone be removed. He's not going to be waylaid by the very real prospect of a stinking body. Four days dead – that means, as per ancient belief, that the spirit has left the body, and there's absolutely no hope that Jesus can do anything. Lazarus is completely, absolutely, physically and spiritually dead. Jesus repeats what he earlier said about seeing the glory of God – *if you believed*.

2020, Covid 19: here we are. We, who are today's believing people of God – in the face of the reality of Covid 19. Being believers is no guarantee of protection (although some churches believe they have a God-given immunity). The possibility of infection and even death is real. Yet we continue to believe...don't we? Maybe some of us are refining what it is that we believe and what that means when confronted by reality. Jesus here is moving us to firmer platforms of belief – beyond what he can do (eg, his healing or miracles), but to who he is and what that means in our lives now. Perhaps moving us from head-belief into heart-knowing.

They took away the stone; Jesus calls out: 'Lazarus, come out'. And so he comes, all bound up in his death cloths. Jesus commands that they unbind him. And so they do.

2020, Covid 19: Wouldn't we love it! The miracle, at last! Doesn't this show us that Jesus has power over the course of life and death? Isn't this the way it should end for us, too?

And so we join our voices with all those who lived through World Wars, other great conflicts and plagues in history, nations and peoples faced with genocide and cruel oppressions. Even people of great faith have brought their questions, doubts, and fears to God, just like the characters in this gospel story – where were you, Jesus? Where are you?

Covid 19: Where is Jesus in all this, if not in an astonishing, sweeping miracle yet to come? Lord, give us eyes see!

There could be many jump-off points to follow here - there's deep, deep theological issues raised in nearly every verse of this story, and in all our possible responses. Particularly, that age-old question of why? (A topic for another sermon!)

I'm going down the simple path.

Where is Jesus in the dread of this pandemic?

Staying with the Lazarus to answer this, let's look into an almost hidden sub-context in this story.

Notice the **crowd**. - "the Jews" – friends, wider family, coming in from Jerusalem and nearer, who gather around to support Mary and Martha. They become more and more visible as the story progresses.

We find Mary and Martha being consoled by the Jews, who are weeping with them. We, too, in this crisis give practical, emotional and spiritual care to those who are in need right now. (Alongside the care, are you praying for them and giving hope?)

It is the crowd, who at Jesus' bidding, take away the stone at the tomb, making it possible for Lazarus to come out: as we, too, help others remove the obstacles in their lives, be it fear or physical or emotional immobility, that are making it difficult for some to do more than merely exist at this time.

It is the crowd, again at Jesus' bidding, who unbind the grave clothes from the raised and bound Lazarus: as we, too, help others disentangle themselves from the things that get in the way of finding new ways to live in this crazy world.

It is this crowd who become the community surrounding and supporting Lazarus as he emerges into new life: as we support those who are finding the world's everyday changes and dangers too tough.

Notice, too, that the action of this crowd in response to Jesus is one of trust and courage – along the way to belief, at the tomb before Lazarus is raised, they follow what Jesus asks them to do. They have the courage to expose themselves to the stench of death, and they seem to be *willing to trust that Jesus knew what he was doing*. It's the community, obedient to Jesus' bidding, that works with Christ in Lazarus' movement from death to life. And the community itself is transformed in the action, as they hear Jesus and see the work of his Father, and some believe.

This story ends up being about the ordinary people, the crowd in the background. While we, humanly, are helpless to stop the coronavirus, we can reach out with Jesus' love and restorative touch. We see, we find, God, in people – people of the Church at all sorts of points on our believing journey, yet still needing God-in-Christ's touch and reassurance; and people not of the Church who are nevertheless on life journeys of fear, wondering and hope – and needing God-in-Christ's touch and reassurance. And God, too, showing himself through them.

That crowd in Lazarus' story move from being a group gathered around death, around things that pass away, to being a community gathered around Christ and the **life** he breathes into people – that's not just Lazarus, but they themselves who are given new life. Can you see yourselves, and St Nicholas in that?

At this time, where are you in this crowd? Wanting no less than an urgent miracle? Or (following the best advice of social distancing etc) in the thick of things as much as you can? Are you looking out for God at work, perhaps being blessed through others and being thankful? Are you open to working with Godself, being used by him, following his voice? Are you continuing to pray that we will all know the glory of God - in whichever ways God acts - through this devastation of Covid 19?

Wherever you are in this story, and in our current world of upheaval and insecurity, hold onto the trust that God-in-Christ will not let us go out of the circle of God's life and love; entrust yourselves to the God who is always with us, in and through everything of life and death.