

Lent 5, 3.29.2020

St. Mark's, Pastor Timothy McKenzie

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

“Lord, if you had been here”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us this morning online for the Service of the Word. Our Music Director and organist Les Ackerman is accompanying us today, and we are thankful for the addition of music to our service. Each week as long as we need to, we plan to continue to stream Sunday worship live on Facebook from this empty sanctuary. It is a surreal and strange feeling to speak into a camera in St. Mark's empty sanctuary. I look forward to the day when we can be together again in person as the body of Christ.

All of the texts for today are about anticipating God's resurrection reality. The words of the prophet Ezekiel, originally written to Israel in Babylonian exile, are words of lament and longing for their homeland and for their temple. Ezekiel writes, “*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.*” In these words of lamentation we can also hear echoes of our own exile from our church community, from our schools, from our workplaces, increasingly from our wider community. We may feel as if we are gradually being cut off completely from many familiar forms of community. We may wonder when we will see one another again in the flesh. Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones symbolized a people in exile feeling as if they were dead. Ezekiel's vision is truly a “*valley of the shadow of death.*” Yet the Lord said to them, “*I will bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.*” The Lord promised resurrection and restoration to the exiled community. This of course, historically came to be when the King of Persia, Cyrus the Great, defeated Babylon and decreed freedom for Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild.

We don't usually use the word “exile” to describe today's situation, instead we talk about “social distancing,” “staying at home,” and “sheltering in place,” but we are in a kind of exile from community with one another. Today I bring you good news from this empty sanctuary to your places of modern exile: we are also people of the resurrection, and we will be restored to our life together, but it will take time and cooperation. As people of the resurrection, we remind ourselves that Christ is always with us. We are not alone.

Our Lenten journey this year has become one of “deep fasting” as we also fast from the Eucharist,

as we fast from life-sustaining community, as we fast from communal song and prayer in this sacred space. Yet we are reminded that God encourages us with the gospel of Christ's resurrection. God encourages us to anticipate moments of Christ's real presence in our lives.

Psalm 130 also reads, "*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits; and in his word I hope.*" As we practice "social distancing" and "staying at home," we are encouraged, more than ever, to look deeply within ourselves to realize that Christ is already truly present within us. As we anticipate Easter, the good news is that Christ lives with us now already wherever we are, and however we are. Now is the day of salvation, now is a time to go more deeply into prayer, connecting to God. Now is a time to use our powerful technology to stay connected with, and to encourage one another. We are a people of hope. We are not alone.

In today's gospel, Martha also speaks words of lament, even anger, to Jesus as she says, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" I think we can understand Martha's words, as we too, are surrounded in our world by fear of death, by fear of a global pandemic that seems to respect no boundaries or borders, or even life itself. Martha's lament could easily be the lament of people all around the world today, "*Lord, if only you had been here!*"

Our modern era is very different than the era of the New Testament. For instance, we don't know why Lazarus died, or what he died from. It is very possible that Lazarus' illness could have been healed today by modern medicine. Scientifically, we know so much more than ancient people did. We have many vaccines and preventative measures for illness and the maintenance of health. Yet we don't know how to cure this current pandemic. It will take time, and in the meantime, we must all cooperate and maintain social distance.

Yet ancient people like Ezekiel, the Psalmist, Paul and Martha all understood the importance of faith for our inner well-being and spiritual health. During Lent, we are encouraged to *pray, fast and give*. So in addition to washing our hands, using hand-sanitizer and staying socially distant, I encourage you to also remember to *pray* for one another, to pray for the world, to pray for medical caregivers and researchers. I encourage you to look upon our *fast* from the Lord's Supper and from daily church life as a way of connecting with God and with one another more deeply in prayer. I encourage you to continue to *give* of your time, talents and treasures, as you are able. In fasting, in prayer, and in giving, we realize that the Lord is with us. In prayer, fasting, and giving we realize the power of faith. We are a people of hope. We are not alone.

Jesus answered Martha's lament, "*Lord, if you had been here,*" with the words, "*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 asked Martha, “*Do you believe this?*” Jesus’ question to Martha reminds all of us that through faith, we already share in the resurrection reality of Jesus. We realize that no matter where or how we are, faith is what makes us truly human.

We don’t know how Jesus raised Lazarus, but we know Lazarus would eventually die again. The purpose of raising Lazarus was to point toward Jesus and his resurrection. After raising Lazarus, Jesus said, “*Unbind him and let him go.*” I believe these words are also meant for each of us.

All of us experience Lazarus-like moments in our lives. As human beings we face broken relationships, life threatening illnesses, loss of work, deaths of loved ones. As human beings we face many, many moments of loss and finality in our lifetimes. And yet each of us can probably also point to many, many moments of reconciliation, restoration, healing, new opportunities, and the ongoing presence of departed loved ones through the gifts they have shared with us.

Holy Week begins a week from today. We will not be together at Easter. Yet Jesus says, “*Unbind him, and let him go.*” Every day Jesus unbinds each of us from tombs of hopelessness and fear. Every day Jesus raises each of us to new life and hope. Every day Jesus unbinds us so that we can live for others. We are not alone. Christ unbinds us to live with hope for others today. Amen