

3.22.2026 Lent 5

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-451

“The Spirit of God dwells in you”

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

Today’s readings are about the center of our faith – they are about Jesus, resurrection, and life. In Romans, Paul describes the life and peace we already know in Christ Jesus, writing, “*To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*” Though we are mortal, we also know the immortal Spirit of God who gives life, healing, and hope to our often-frail human bodies.

God’s promise of life amid death can be heard in the well-known “Valley of Dry Bones” passage of Ezekiel 37. In a valley of death, the prophet Ezekiel is confronted with a ghastly scene: a valley not of organized graves and skeletons, but of bones, the mass grave of a generation of fallen people. It is Israel in exile. God asks Ezekiel, “*Mortal, can these bones live?*” Ezekiel replies, “*O Lord God, you know.*” The pressing question about life after death is posed not by someone mortal, but by God. It is God who asks if it is possible to bridge the chasm between life and death. This question is at the center of our faith: do we believe in such a God? Ezekiel wisely leaves the answer up to God. His answer, “*O Lord God, you know,*” is an honest reply because we know all too well our human limitations and the reality of death. Death is that boundary we all must cross and from which we cannot cross back. God answers Ezekiel with a promise, “*And 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.*” God reveals a divine concern so great that death can never separate humanity from God’s love.

In Romans, Paul declares trust in God’s promise of life, writing, “*the Spirit of God dwells in you.*” Paul is describing the paradox of faith in Jesus Christ: though one day we will die, we live knowing God’s Spirit. This paradox is at the heart of Jesus’ words to Martha, “*Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die,*” reminding us that eternal life is not only a future hope, but also the present reality of God’s Spirit dwelling in you.

We are not so different from the human beings of antiquity. A valley of dry bones and the tombs of loved ones remind us of our mortality. Both Mary and Martha express not only the pain and grief of our humanity, but they also hope in the God who promises resurrection and life in the Spirit. This is the paradox of faith Jesus describes, “*Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*”

Standing before the tomb of Lazarus, these words of Jesus are also words for us. Daily in

newsfeeds and on television, we see people around the world grieving the deaths of loved ones amid ghastly scenes of war and natural disasters. Against the world's constant state of grief, we also live with private grief at the death of loved ones. Jesus standing before Lazarus' tomb reminds us that he lives raised, standing before and alongside each of us because his presence gives resurrection and life, bridging the chasm of death with his life-giving love.

There is a tradition in Japan that I have been a part of as a pastor and as a family member. In the weeks after Easter, churches and families often gather at cemeteries, church columbariums and family graves to read together the stories of resurrection, to sing our faith, and to offer prayers of thanksgiving for the lives of beloved friends and family. The faith that beats in our hearts is a witness to the many faithful departed friends and family who walked before us trusting Jesus' promise of life. This tradition recognizes in Jesus' words, "*I am the resurrection and the life,*" a future promise and a present reality.

Mary and Martha knew the reality of death. Their beloved brother had fallen ill and died. When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. There was no doubt about his death, yet Martha expressed great faith, saying "*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.*" Like Ezekiel standing in a dark valley of death and bones, Martha holds open the door of hope – a hope beyond all comprehension, saying, "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*" Jesus bridges the chasm of death with the life-giving 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. Do you believe this?*" Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth.

Jesus' challenging question, "*Do you believe this,*" presses in upon us for an answer. We may hope abstractly for resurrection, but to actually believe in it can seem like a bridge too far. Like the ancient chasm between mortal humanity and the immortal gods, such a hope of life everlasting can seem too unreal to believe. Yet Martha answers, "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.*" Jesus hasn't simply returned to offer polite condolences to Martha and Mary. He has returned to Bethany to reveal himself as the bridge between heaven and earth, announcing in the greatest of his "I am" words, "*I am the resurrection and the life.*"

Jesus Christ is the paradox. He is both the future and the present. Paul witnesses to this paradox writing, "*he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwells in you.*" This is something to think about, when in a few moments you will confess your faith in the words of *The Apostles' Creed*, which ends with these words; "I believe... in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen." To believe is to hope against hope that the

one who raised Lazarus also dwells in me and will stand at my grave to raise me from death to life everlasting. As modern people, this challenging question, “*Do you believe this,*” lingers as we also face our own mortality and the tomb.

Jesus’ words, “*Take away the stone,*” are an audacious command, announcing that the Giver of Life stands before even places of death. The paradox of faith is that we hope for not only a future resurrection, but for life everlasting while we live. Jesus’ words, “*Lazarus, come out!*” are also spoken to each of us, because while we live, we also find ourselves in places of death and dying, walled into tombs of grief and despair, cynicism and unfaith, illness and addiction, mistrust and anger.

Jesus stands at that place where you feel most powerless and cries, “*Come out!*” – come out into the light; come out and live. He lives to unbind you from the powers that hold you in death’s grip so you might know his Spirit alive in you.

I have no doubt that Lazarus lived his life a changed person, no longer afraid of death. For though Lazarus would one day truly die, he had already experienced what each of us know by faith: Jesus comes to free you from death with his life-giving Spirit.

Give thanks because the Spirit of God dwells in you.

Nothing – no tomb, grave, or power in this world – can ever separate you from his resurrection and life.

Amen.