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Lent 5 Series A 2017

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Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 2

This Sunday we will consider and preach on some of the most well-known and potent texts in the pericope cycle. I believe that we will find that there are a dozen or more sermons here. Which one will we preach this week? Which one do our people need to hear? That will probably be our biggest challenge, not finding something to say, but discerning what our people need to hear from this text.

The Lenten cycle is drawing to a close. This is the last Sunday numbered in Lent, next Sunday begins the Holy Week. Have you got your palm fronds ordered or provided for? If not, talk to a local florist, they can get them for you by Palm Sunday.

*On this last Sunday in Lent, the tension between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day grows. In the raising of Lazarus they will find reason enough to kill him. Jesus threatens the stability of their world. The events which have transpired were so electrifying that **the people may rise in rebellion** and then Romans will surely come and destroy them. There are however bigger games afoot than the comfort of the Jewish elite in the first century. The Lord is redeeming his creation. Even the High Priest who will be instrumental in Jesus death is an unwitting prophet in all this.*

For the hearer this many years later this story is first and foremost a story of the resurrection of Lazarus and the words of Jesus to his grieving sisters, words which for many of your people will remind them of the last funeral they attended at your church – “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, if anyone believes in me he will never die.”

For the catechumen of the first centuries and for the mourning of the 21st century this was and is the message of Hope. God has come to deal with the greatest problem of all, the problem none of us can escape, the problem which even overwhelms the loftiest ruler and his tax man: Death. Last week we wondered about the usefulness of light as a metaphor. This week’s metaphor, death, has lost none of its potency. Indeed, it is not a metaphor at all.

What does it mean to hope? Too often in our world, like faith, hope is seen as a less than certain thing. The Californian of last year who looked out over the dry lakebeds of his state might wistfully have said, “I hope it rains.” Right now he might be hoping that it stops. The use of hope in that instance implies his grim expectation that it might not. “I hope I get paid this week” only makes sense to us if the person who says it works for a company that just filed for bankruptcy. If my company is solvent, I don’t hope for a paycheck, I expect it. Yet, the Bible uses this word hope differently. For Paul, hope is a sure and certain thing. The people of the ancient world had been engaged in a discussion about the meaning of knowledge for centuries before Jesus was born. Plato had said that the things we think are “real” are but shadows of a deeper reality we cannot really know. The ancients actually thought that the knowledge of that deeper reality was a surer thing than empirical knowledge which they suspected. They always were suspicious of their eyes, their ears, and the rest of their senses. Reason and the interior life often afforded a

more sure knowledge. We find hard to imagine. They would have thought us to be unreflective fools.

The problem for us who live in an empirical age is that we don't have hope's object in hand for hope is an expectation which trusts the Word of God. Faith, the noun, the relationship which God established in our baptism, hopes in God. Faith looks forward to something that it does not yet have; yet, because God has promised it, the person banks on that reality. The martyrs who bravely held to their confession and shed their blood are the sort of people who are acting on hope. They are the clearest examples, but there are many more. The Sunday School teacher who invests her life in teaching children the good news has that hope. The housewife who reaches out to her angry neighbor because she knows that God has forgiven all sins and Jesus wants this relationship to be restored, is also acting on hope. She is counting on Jesus' help in this. The man who broaches the God subject with a friend and invites him or her to church with him, is also acting on hope. God has promised that the Spirit works through those conversations, sometimes despite us, and so he bumbles through it in Hope.

Of course this sort of hope is not entirely absent from the world. In a sense it is another side of the trust coinage we worked with a couple of weeks ago. This sort of sure and biblical hope takes the check into the bank and cashes it. The faith of the person expresses hope that that person in the other lane will not cross over and smash into us head on, etc.

But there is a difference between Hope and Faith. Faith is the broader term, it is the whole relationship in which God saves his creation. Hope is something that expresses this relationship. I am a child of God – that is faith statement. Hope looks forward to the gentle care and strong love of the Father, expecting him to come through for us.

Hope, whether the Christian or other sorts of hope, is very powerful when it is found among people. People who hope have toppled corrupt regimes and totally changed the world. The people of Egypt and Tunisia and Lybia and perhaps Syria were moved by hope for something better if they could just get rid of the tyrant. It appears that it is working out better in some places than others, but it was largely hope that filled those squares. If you look at a lot of the great movements in the world, you will find hope at the heart of them, from the folks who lit candles and sang songs and toppled the communist regimes of Eastern Europe or the Civil Rights movement right here in North America.

What also needs to be recognized is that hope is not a terribly rational thing. It is easily deceived and when it is crushed, it is very disappointing for people. I think that much of the talk of hope by presidential candidates is a Machiavellian manipulation of this facet of hope. People want to hope in something and when they start to feel it, they don't ask too many tough questions. Much of the strength of communist parties in Russia and former Soviet bloc countries can be tied to the fact that the hope which was expressed in the Orange Revolution, the Yeltsin years, etc., has been disappointed by corruption and mismanagement of those countries. We are seeing much of that in Ukraine on the news even now. When I was in Kyrgyzstan in 2006 I was struck by how

cynical the people were. I distinctly remember my translator Alosha bitterly saying: "Under the Soviet system we had money but the stores were empty. Now the stores are full, but we have no money." The promise of hoped-for freedom rang hollow for him.

What do our people hope for in 21st century America? We do not hope for food or a dry place to sleep or enough clothes. If anything our belts are extended to the last notch, our homes are twice as large as they need to be and we really ought to empty some of our closets with a trip to the Goodwill drop box. What do we hope for? Perhaps we hope for meaning or significance. Perhaps we hope for eternal life as we feel the aches of aging. Perhaps we hope for reunion with those who have died before us. Perhaps we just hope heaven involves a good mattress and a chance to take a great vacation. What do you think?

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, by Your great goodness mercifully look upon Your people that we may be governed and preserved evermore in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This prayer seems bland and not up to the task today. I don't know what you think, but it just doesn't grab me and ask me to think or feel. The words are fine, mind you, nothing wrong with it, but it doesn't seem like a terribly deep one.

God in his great goodness is asked to look upon his people with mercy. Mercy of course is a wonderful word. We have said this before. To cry for mercy is an act of a humble person. One cannot have mercy on the strong or the innocent, but only on the weak and the guilty. We want this merciful look from God because we want to be governed and preserved evermore in body and spirit. In the science labs on the third floor of Luther hall at Concordia University there are all these specimens preserved in various solutions. This is always what I think of when someone asks God to preserve me. I should perhaps be thinking of a life preserver, but I am remembering all the dead things preserved in the science lab or the gallons of berry preserves we have in jars in our basement. Do we really want to be preserved? Of course I know this is not what it means, but the word has associations linked to it.

God's governance and preservation seem too general to me. Can anyone rescue this prayer for me? I think the readings are far more exciting, perhaps that is alright that the prayer doesn't try to compete, but I would have thought something with bolder and stronger language would have been appropriate to this day. I would have thought that a message about hope or victory over death, et. al., would have been a good idea.

Readings

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and

behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³ And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” ⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹ Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”

Many of us probably have the old spiritual ringing in our ears after reading this.

There are several themes which present themselves in this text. Ezekiel has spent the first part of his ministry destroying the misplaced hope of the exiled people of Israel. You may remember that Nebuchadnezzar had exiled them in stages. Ezekiel was part of the first stage, the upper crust of the society, the people that Nebuchadnezzar thought most likely to lead another revolt. He brought them to Babylon as sort of a hostage group, in an effort to secure the good behavior of the folks whom he left behind to till the fields and pay the taxes, especially pay the taxes. Ezekiel, of the high priestly family, was one of that first group. His first prophetic call after he arrived in Babylon was to smash the hopes that the first exiles had of going home. He had to tell them that all was lost; the city would soon be utterly destroyed. He hated his job much like Jeremiah hated his job. He had to tell the Jewish people that God’s wrath was coming and it was deserved. His brutal imagery in chapter 16 convicts even today.

Once that final destruction of Jerusalem happened, however, Ezekiel became a prophet of hope. He would go into exquisite detail about the floor plan of the new temple, anticipating its restoration. Here in chapter 37, he is tackling the disappointment and disillusionment of the people head on. They feel like dried up bones, people abandoned by God. The hope they had of returning to their homes was shattered by Nebuchadnezzar’s army. But Ezekiel calls them to a

new hope, a hope in God. The covenant had not been broken; indeed, the old covenant was still in force. The exile was simply the covenant in action. God would restore the fortunes of his people, no matter how difficult that looked.

As we look around the political world right now it appears that the hopes many had for a new sort of presidency, a new beginning in the Arab world, the hope of a new world order after the fall of the Soviet Union, etc., have been dashed. The same old corrupt and dying world confronts us which we knew before. We were tired of it then, we are tired of it now. Ezekiel points us to another object for our hope.

Ezekiel is noted for his vivid imagery and baroque sign acts. This little piece is part of that well-deserved reputation. The sound of the bones rattling as they came together always has almost given me the creeps. I can imagine that sound.

Ezekiel seems to be saying a couple of things here that a preacher could hang onto for a sermon, or at least for an illustration in a sermon on the John text:

- 1. The power of the word – Ezekiel prophecies to the bones and the wind, and they hear his call and obey him. The word of the prophet is potent because it is also the word of the creator and lord of the universe. Could we proclaim that our folks are also prophets of a sort? Don't they bear witness to the good word of God? Don't they go out with a message that is empowered by the Holy Spirit to give life to the people who hear them?*
- 2. Death itself is undone here. The bones are very dry, this is no resuscitation, but a re-creation of the very flesh and sinews and skin which are necessary for human life. These guys have been dead a long time.*
- 3. The Spirit is an interesting play here, because the Greek and Hebrew words for Spirit can also be the words for breath and wind. (We ran into this in John 3 when Jesus compared the Spirit of God to the wind which blew in the trees.)*
- 4. Notice as well the description of the people. They are without hope, but Ezekiel calls them to hope not in the sort of things which might normally give hope, but in the promise and the gift of God. This is critically important here. God can undo even the biggest problem of all.*

Ezekiel's words must have been remembered on the day that Cyrus ascended to the throne of the Persian Empire and one of his first decrees was that the exiled people could go home. This happened within the lifetime of some of the folks who heard Ezekiel preach, but when Ezekiel said these things, no one could have imagined that their oppressors would have said "Go home." What is more the very oppressors who had taken them from their homeland and destroyed their temple now were helping to fund the reconstruction effort! Who would have thought it could have happened.

What is also interesting is the extent to which the Jewish nation in exile did not hope for this. The majority of Jews did not take the Persians up on the offer. Most of them stayed in Babylon where a thriving Jewish community was maintained right up into the modern era. The Talmud will be written in Babylon and much of what shapes modern Judaism will come from that part of the world.

Are we hoping for what God has promised? Will any of us be disappointed if the Savior shows up and says forget about the plans you had this weekend, He has heaven for you? It seems hard to imagine, but the Jews of Babylon will think that this land of exile is better than the promised land of Canaan. To what extent did Ezekiel's prophetic message fall on deaf ears? Someone listened and valued it; his book was retained in the OT.

To what do our folks point when they imagine that they are hopeless, cut off from God? Who needs to hear the modern day Ezekiel and his prophecy of life? We pointed to the political hopes which have been dashed for many. But I would guess that most of our folks are not motivated that way so much. We drew up this list three years ago. Does it need to be expanded?

- 1. Economic – Everything seems so volatile. The current vibe is of tumult and the feeling seems to be that we are on the edge of a disaster.*
- 2. Folks whose families are falling apart? When your marriage is ending, it can feel like the whole world is pretty pointless.*
- 3. The addict who has fallen once more back into the cesspool of his/her addiction, who feels like this is just too much for him/her. There is no hope of ever living free of this scourge.*
- 4. What about the person married to or who simply loves the addict and is watching their dear one descend once more into alcohol or drugs and cannot do anything about it?*
- 5. Perhaps they are an immigrant or a refugee. They may not be only afraid of immigration and officials who might deport them. They are also afraid of the majority of voters who elected the current occupant. They have a limited ability to see that those who voted may not share the feelings expressed in all the rhetoric, some of it quite anti-immigrant.*
- 6. The victim of abuse – a husband or a father or someone who has trapped me or someone I love in a relationship which is defined by nothing healthy.*
- 7. What about the man or woman who works so hard but cannot get a job which makes enough to support a family or can only find a job which is dangerous or demeaning.*
- 8. What about people in a conflicted congregation? Do they feel like there is no hope for their congregation? Do they check out of worship because they have lost hope in this place? Their bones are dry, mummified by a history of hurt and conflict unresolved. They cannot see a reason to back to church – they have lost all hope. They leave behind their friends, community, worshipping community and so much more. Perhaps we need to*

make “Ezekiels” out of the folks who are in church so they can reach to the “de-churched” folks who have checked out. They may be more effective than the professional – especially if the past conflict centered around the professional.

9. *Perhaps we speak to a parish who has had a leader or member who tragically despaired and suicided. Or somehow that parish has watched them go through a moral failing, the leader’s marriage falls apart, etc. Especially bad if it was a pastor.*

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

² O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,

that you may be feared.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord

more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is plentiful redemption.

⁸ And he will redeem Israel

from all his iniquities.

This psalm is a classic penitential psalm of Lent and Advent. The psalmist waits for the Lord, as do we. We wait. God comes, he has promised it. But we wait along with all creation for the unveiling of the sons of God. Paul, in Romans 8, just after our text today, notes that all creation waits for the revelation of the Sons of God with groaning.

I wonder if we are really worried so much about God’s ledger book in which sins are recorded and lives are marked. Do we really wait for the Lord with the same anticipation as the Psalmist? Or have we pretty much settled for this life, broken but made modestly comfortable by our technology and coping skills.

The psalmist seems to be alien to us. How will we make his prayer our prayer today?

Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

This passage in Paul is one of the great passages of Scripture; unfortunately it is often drowned out by the last part of the chapter which is deservedly also a great passage.

In terms of the argument of Romans, this is a recapitulation of the whole first part of the book. From here, he will work out the implications of the text. This should really be read as a restatement of chapters 3-7, which is a pretty impressive feat and which makes this rather tough to preach. There is just so much going on here.

Paul is summarizing here, so a thorough knowledge of what has gone on before is helpful. Immediately before this section he has done the whole wrestling match between the old and the new man. The condemnation is that which flows out of the mixed reality. We are sinner and saint. As a sinner I am still there in the mire of sin. As a saint, I am perfect and beautiful in Christ's great gift. Justice is not overturned, and now we may truly keep the law as it was intended to be kept, out of the joyful love of the creature to the creator, all because of the redemption of Christ.

It is the next passage that has some interesting traction for the preacher. Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who walk by the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. This Spirit mind set leads to life and peace, and Paul says this is not just a thing of some ethereal plane, but a thing for mortal bodies as well.

So what are the things of the Spirit? I think we will want to talk about this on Tuesday a little bit. Clearly this is not a dichotomy between physical and spiritual. The Bible really does not know that dichotomy, that is later neo-Platonism. What is the difference between things of the Spirit and things of the flesh? They may not be so different to look at but I would think that the attitude

of the person over against these things is important. What is more what one expects of God in this is also important.

I find that people are often confused by the “if’s” in Romans. In Greek this is not really implying that the Spirit has not been given in verse 9. We might better translate this as “since” in a closer rendition of what Paul means. I explain this to my students this way. It is what I call an evidentiary use of the word “if.” Thus, if the window is wet, it must be raining. Pointing to a wet window, a frequent occurrence during a Portland school year, I show them how that works. It is not a question of whether the window is wet, but the conclusion is obvious.

Of course the whole resurrection of the mortal bodies ties this lesson to the OT and the Gospel lesson, but I am thinking that the stronger tie is actually in the hope which is expressed in the Spiritual things. We should talk more about this if you are preaching on this text.

John 11:1-45 (46-53) or John 11:17-27, 38-53

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸ The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹ Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” ¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” ¹² The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶ So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

²⁸ When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹ And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.

³¹ When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴ And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.

³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” ⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, ⁴⁶ but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰ Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” ⁵¹ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. ⁵³ So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

Vs 25 ff. was of interest to us tonight. We thought this might give us a chance to talk about eternal life as a here and now thing, a thing which begins in our baptism. We are alive in Christ now, not looking forward to some heaven in which we will finally be truly alive. Rather, we are

alive right now. We are in the kingdom of God right now. Paul says this is by faith and not yet by sight, but that makes us no less participant and part of this. When in the Creed we confess our faith in the resurrection of the dead, do we confess a faith in an event or in the person of Christ? I think you can read this passage argue that we are confessing faith in the person who raises the dead.

We were also noticing that the connections between this reading and last week's healing of the blind man need to be developed. Both events are described as bringing glory to Christ – both the blind man's blindness and the death of Lazarus. The illness does not lead to death – what is the illness that leads to death? Is it not the same blindness which afflicts the Pharisees at the end of John 9?

This familiar passage of Scripture again is very long. So long the preacher might well want to preach as he reads it, or at least don't read it as the Gospel and then read it again. Unlike the story of the Jesus and the woman and the well or the story of Jesus opening the eyes of the man born blind, this one may have enough familiarity to it that you can preach a smaller portion.

But there are also some surprises in there. In the first part we learn something of Jesus. Jesus has friends. Did you ever think about the significance of that? Are you one of them? How do you know? It sounds like there could be some really important fringe benefits to being Jesus friend.

*Jesus comes off in all this as almost sounding manipulative. He waits two days before heading out for Bethany. Does he use the suffering of Lazarus? Does he use my suffering? Do I want him to? Does he do this for all his friends? Lazarus' death becomes a teaching tool for Jesus. Will my death be a teaching tool for someone? I have learned much from the long cancerous deaths of some of my parishioners. Yet, I would rather not be some object lesson for God's pedagogical program. But do I have any say in that? That lack of agency is a challenge to my modern protestant sensibility. *Jesus never leaves Lazarus to the sickness that leads to death, the real death, the result of soulsick unbelief. Jesus knows that this is not the eternal death of Lazarus.**

As with all these stories, Jesus' own words about himself are often the most important and the place to start: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (vss 25-26) Jesus is not merely the one who points us toward the resurrection and life, he is that resurrection and life. Just as he is the light in chapter 9 and the water of life in chapter 4, he is also the resurrection and life we each so desperately need.

I find the question at the end of the reading really interesting. He already knows what Martha believes, John is very clear to portray Christ with this sort of knowledge. He is interested in her hearing this answer, I think. Does he delight to hear our confession of these words? Is there something more going on? Does he work here with the truism that what we hear our selves saying we most often believe more surely? Confessing our faith is something of a feedback loop. By the act of confession the heart's conviction and confession is strengthened. Have you ever

had the situation where you were not sure about something until you were asked to take a stand? Once you did take it, then the issue became much clearer for you? Sometimes the act of confessing something “locks it in” for us.

Jesus is obviously moved by the grief of the sisters and the death of his friend. He weeps. That verse is actually quite profound for us. Too often I have heard preachers admonish folks not to grieve at a funeral, but that is not modeled by our Lord. He openly weeps for his friend. Death is never what he wants nor is it really our friend. Only the living can call death a friend, and then they deceive themselves. David is most distressed by the grave. Jesus grieves what it does. There is a whole sermon in that shortest verse of the Bible.

What is John doing with the sisters? Martha comes out, Mary stays in. Martha returns and gets Mary to come out with what looks like a deception. Is this Martha looking out for her sister? Is there something more happening here? I don't know. Is this just Martha caring about her sister and manipulating her outside so she can run into Jesus?

The Jews do not understand, they don't get it why Mary leaves and they don't get it what Jesus has done. They don't get it that he has come to work a greater miracle than healing Lazarus. They just don't get it. Even when they prophecy correctly, they don't get it. Did you know that there are unintentional and accidental prophets?

Jesus shows up at the tomb, Martha, ever practical, is worried about the odor. Jesus tells her that she will see the glory of God and she relents. The tomb is opened and in a great act of faithful relationship with his Father, Jesus prays and calls to that dead man with the creator's voice. Shuffling in the linens in which he had been wrapped with spices, Lazarus comes out. Everyone is so stunned that Jesus has to tell them to unwrap him. Are they afraid he is a ghost?

What I have always wondered was if Lazarus was disappointed about this? That all depends on what you think happens after a person dies. As the brother to these two sisters, and one hears nothing about any other family, Lazarus would have been pretty important for two unmarried women, especially women with a past. In verse 2 John had taken time to point out that Mary was the one who washed Jesus feet with her hair. In the telling of that story Luke suggests that she was a great sinner. Perhaps it is another such event to which Luke refers. In any event, the two sisters would potentially have had a very difficult time without their brother. Legally their situation may have been somewhat precarious. This resurrection was a new lease on life for Lazarus but also for the sisters in profound ways. (Do you remember Paul's injunction to keep in mind the things of the Spirit and not the flesh? How does that work here? I think Jesus caring about the plight of these two women enough to raise their dead brother back to physical life is a very spiritual thing.)

Jesus calls out, and Lazarus comes out. Sounds a little like Ezekiel, doesn't it. [This could present an opportunity for a preacher to talk about just what happens when we call out to dry bones and desiccated, rotting corpses on a Sunday morning in absolution and sermon. Luther saw his](#)

preaching as an occasion for God to give life. Do we as preachers, do our hearers as congregants come to church expecting that? Does Jesus yell, "Lazarus, come out!" because if he had not specified the whole cemetery would have come to life?

This is also no resuscitation like we might expect a paramedic to make if we are in cardiac arrest. This is a body that has been dead four days in a very warm climate. There will be an odor if you roll that stone away and it will be a bad odor. The stench of a dead body is not something you ever forget. At the same time, we do note some differences. Lazarus will die again, or at least we presume as much. Jesus heals and resurrects Lazarus, presumably he did not die again immediately. What is more, even here we see the differences. Jesus neatly folds up the linen clothe with which he had been wrapped, but Lazarus needs to be unwound. The resurrection we anticipate in Christ is different than this as well.

The reaction of the Pharisees is also important here. John very clearly gives the impression that this miraculous sign is the occasion for Jesus death. They are afraid that he will stir up the restive populace and they will lose all. In truth this was not an unfounded fear. In 68 AD they would do just that, about 40 years after Jesus death and resurrection. Then again they would follow Bar Kochba in 134, about a hundred years later. Bar Kochba means "son of a star" and many thought he was the Messiah. The Romans would utterly crush both rebellions. In 70 AD the temple was destroyed. In 134, the Jews were again exiled from the environs of Jerusalem, forbidden to live within sight of the Holy City. The Romans would repopulate the city with Gentiles and rename it after Jupiter, just to erase the painful memory of those two rebellions and rub a little salt in the Jews' wounds.

One of the sons of those new residents was a young man named Justin who would win the title Martyr in 163. You can read his first and second apology of his Christian faith online if you Google Justin Martyr. You might just find that to be an interesting read. He writes of second century Christians who were using this text as a catechetical text on hope. You might also find Ignatius of Antioch's letters interesting for that. He was an early Bishop who wrote some letters on his way to death by wild animals in the coliseum in Rome. He died in 114 or so. Both of these men will reference this passage in which they look forward to the resurrection and the life. Do we, like they, think "resurrection" is a person or an event?

Do we have this text two weeks before Easter so that we can, with Ezekiel frame the resurrection proclamation which is coming down the road? This is not really a spoiler. No one will really be surprised on Easter morning, in fact our challenge is in getting them not to yawn out of excessive familiarity with the plot line. This framing action can actually serve to raise an expectation of your Easter message and put them on the edge of their seat in a sense.

What you are really focusing on here is what it is that Jesus died for on Good Friday. The victory that is Easter morning is a victory over all my problems, not just my naughtiness or my guilty feelings, but Jesus' victory is the victory over my death, my sorrow, my pain, my weakness,

my fatigue, my fears, etc. We confess that we are broke, and broken. We are enslaved to our addictions and our loved ones are too.

Law

1. We die – no one gets out of this thing alive. Our best option, short of the parousia, is to end up in a cemetery. Those who die in peaceful times get that privilege. Many, indeed most, end up in some anonymous grave or simply abandoned.
2. Death also stinks for the survivors. Martha and Mary are very sad. Jesus is very sad. Sadness is the appropriate response to death. Such sadness is not a failure of faith, but a very good thing to feel when a loved one has succumbed to our common enemy. But it still is miserable.
3. It is not that life is so short, but that you're dead so long! I saw that on a t-shirt at a youth gathering.
4. There is no escape from death, and I think this is the huge issue that we have to get across to people. So many times I have spoken with folks who are not Christians who also consider that their dead unbaptized and otherwise utterly pagan friend is "in a better place." Are we so weak of will or conviction that we cannot suggest that they might not be a better place? Without Jesus, death is a really terrible thing and those who think he doesn't really matter for this are deceiving themselves. Death is a huge problem for the human race, both individually and corporately.
5. We also have no Scriptural indication of the neo-platonic idea that those who are dead are somehow given to float around in some blissful state while waiting for the resurrection here. The dead seem to be, for lack of a better term, dead!
6. In the verses which follow this section in Romans, Paul says that the whole creation groans waiting for the revelation of the sons of God (that's us). That revelation is also known as resurrection. The whole world grieves death, and with reason. It wasn't supposed to be that way. Last weekend a mudslide wiped a small community off the map in Washington State. A few weeks before a modern jet liner simply disappeared, apparently with hundreds lost. Such things are not supposed to happen, we think. But they do.

Gospel

1. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The resurrection is not something I have to find or attain to, but rather it comes looking for me. He calls me forth from the grave and in response to his summons, I too will answer.

- 2 The resurrection is the Word of God. That same word which called this world into being is operative in the resurrection. It can call disparate parts of me from the four corners of creation and reunite them, recreate them, and I will be me once more. This is very good thing.
- 3 Jesus loves me, he does not forget about me in death, but he who has given his life for me grieves over my own death and vows that he has done something about it in his passion, crucifixion and resurrection.
- 4 Jesus is very concerned about my own faith and hope in this resurrection. He carefully nurtures, cares for, and calls it forth. Though this is wholly his garden to tend, and its fruit belongs wholly to him, the crop of faith and hope which he engenders is lovingly and carefully nurtured in my life.
- 5 The resurrection is not some float on a cloud sort of thing, but a real, flesh and blood sort of thing. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, God delights in the creation and we can expect to see him act to save it, including my own flesh and blood.

Sermon Ideas *There are no less than nine sermon ideas down there in various stages of construction. Like I said earlier, this is not a matter of finding something to say, but a matter of praying about and discerning what our people need to hear.*

1. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life (Gospel lesson: That the Holy Spirit would move the hearer to recognize his/her death problem and be comforted in the promise of Christ – he is the solution to this problem and every problem.)

This sermon will draw on all four of the readings above, as they revolve around the promise of resurrection. It might seem that we are anticipating Easter, but we are really getting ready for it. In a culture which makes a serious effort to avoid death entirely, this sermon will not flinch from its reality. Such brutal honesty will have to be met with similarly frank promises from God.

- a. In the valley of the dry bones, the bones are very dry. God's Word, that is Jesus, is up to the task of resurrecting those long dead. Ezekiel's vision speaks to the capabilities of Jesus.
- b. In the Epistle lesson Paul says that though the body may be dying and dead, the Spirit which God has engendered is life. We cannot judge this situation by what our eyes see.
- c. But the real emphasis will be on the Gospel lesson as Jesus raises the dead man, Lazarus. The other texts will be but precursors to this one as we see Jesus grieving at the grave of his friend like every human being who has ever lived grieves at the

graves of his friends. But unlike any other human being who has ever lived, he does something about it.

- d. The place you want to leave the hearer today is really in the shoes of the psalmist. He waits on the Lord, intensely. Blessed is the man whose sins are forgiven, because that means no evil of this life, nor death itself, is beyond His rescue.

The development of the Law will be your challenge here because our culture is terribly resistant to talking about death and this has often infected the ranks of Christians as well. Our funeral homes prevent us from really seeing death. The corpses of our loved ones are laid on what appear to be soft beds, they are presented to us as lifelike and asleep, and when you go to the cemetery even the dirt will be covered by fake grass. Out here in Portland the obituaries rarely speak of a funeral service, but instead they are “celebrations of life.” But a celebration of life doesn’t really address the huge hole that is left in my life by the death of this person. My memories are a poor substitute for the real thing.

The move away from funerals I believe to be the work of our enemy. A Christian funeral is a great time to speak the Gospel, a celebration of life is just sad when all you have are memories and not a promise of a resurrection. Funerals stare death straight in the face and force us back to that one who offers any hope on that day: Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, by whom we do indeed come to the Father and Life Eternal.

The hearer may be in the shoes of Mary, who wonders why Jesus did not come and prevent this death. But this is a rut to get stuck in. Jesus embraces their grief and he does something about it. He does not tell them not to cry, nor does he leave them in their grief. He raises Lazarus. Jesus is the resurrection – the resurrection has a face, hands, and body.

2. Prophecy to the Dry Bones (Preaching to the Boneyard) (OT and Gospel lesson – that the Holy Spirit would embolden and empower the hearer to speak His Word to their neighbors, family, friends, and others.)

Ezekiel seemed to be given an impossible task – his audience were bones, dead dry bones. Talking to them did not seem like it would work. But when God sends us out with a job to do, a Word to speak, it is with his power and Spirit that we speak.

Our neighbors may not seem like they are receptive to our word, they may seem like difficult “nuts to crack.” But it is not our word which we speak, it is Christ’s word which we speak, empowered by His Holy Spirit. That makes that Word effective.

We can go out of these doors with courage and boldness. We can go out with great hope. God is afoot, he is at work in the words which we speak just as he was for Ezekiel and the discouraged and disheartened people of his day. God touches their hearts in our words.

The preacher will need to motivate with the Gospel. Many of us are preaching to legacy congregations, parishes which have a great history but which are now in decline and facing financial realities. Will they be here in a few years? This congregation needs to hear this word spoken powerfully to them. They themselves feel like dry bones, wasting away while the world passes them by. They feel, perhaps not like they are dead yet, but they can see the undertaker digging the hole out there for them.

The person sent out into the community from such a parish will need him/herself to know that God even raises old bones like mine, makes me viable, even when I cannot see it or reason does not suggest that this can work.

3. The Christian Hope (OT lesson: That the Holy Spirit would engender a living and vibrant hope in the hearer.)

This sermon is really for the discouraged, and it might not be the folks who are discouraged in the face of death as the Gospel lesson wants us to take this. The Israelites were discouraged because their nation was in ruins. Perhaps our kingdom, our congregation, is in ruins or certainly a hollow shell of its once greater glory. I used to serve Roseburg, Oregon which is the center of Douglas County. At one point, 1968, the county boasted the highest per capita income in the state. Once the timber economy collapsed in the 1980's because of the spotted owl controversy, the economic state of the county collapsed as well. When I arrived in 2000 it had the lowest per capita income of the state. Our town and every other little town in the area seemed like it was simply a string of shuttered businesses, run down homes, and abandoned dreams. That was not actually true, there were signs of life and growth, but for someone who had remembered the good times, it really felt like that.

This sermon wants to replace the discouragement with hope. That will take time and the Spirit. Ezekiel used the powerful image of resurrection here and it might be what you want to use too, but it is not just a resurrection of the body but of much more. For the Israelites it was the resurrection of their nation and their community. It really did happen. The Jewish culture today is one of the oldest contiguous cultures in the world. They have lived most of that without their homeland, preserving themselves as a pilgrim people, exiled from their homeland. It is a noble story, unfortunately sullied by some of their recent abuses of the Palestinians.

I am imagining a preacher in a building which was designed to seat hundreds but who is gathering with dozens on a Sunday morning. The budget is extremely tight, the future of the parish looks as grim as the heads are grey. He would preach hope. But this needs to be preached in a way which honors and listens to the text.

- a. The hope belongs to God – not to me. I don't get to define the hope, I just get to have it. God's answer for the Jewish folks a long time ago was not that the

kingdom of David would be restored as they envisioned it. They spent many long years as a backwater outpost of the Persian, then the Greek, and then Roman Empires. When the new David came, he was so outside their expectations, they almost did not recognize him, at least many did not.

- b. Hope can fail and turn to discouragement. The people of God are accusing him of not loving them. They have despaired of the love of God. We can do that too if we focus only on our problems and thereby drown out his promises.
 - c. The word and the kingdom of His Church belong to God as well. He loves the good work of the Church and he will see that it happens. The good work which this congregation has done lies in his hands and he will bring it to fruit to harvest. It might not include this institution, but it will include his kingdom.
 - d. That said, God also works resurrection – but often it comes from surprising quarters. The Jews returned when their captors decided one day to let them go home. They were looking for a new Moses like figure, someone who would smite the Babylonians with plagues, but they got Nehemiah and Ezra, folks who worked inside the Persian empire, folks who led them very differently from Moses. Hope means we have our hearts opened to the wonderful and new ways that God will accomplish this.
 - e. God never forgets his promises – he had told David that his son would always rule, he had told the people of God that he would bring them home, he had told them that if they worshipped other Gods he would send them away to chastise them. He had promised them prophets and leaders like Ezekiel.
4. Jesus has friends (Gospel: That the Holy Spirit would befriend the hearer, bringing them the blessings of Christ's friendship.)

This sermon would simply play with that reality. Being the friend of Jesus in this text has interesting ramifications. Mary and Martha are comforted, but Lazarus must pass through death and resurrection, but only to die again. What does it mean to be the friend of Jesus? He might use my suffering as an object lesson, it is true, but my life is filled with meaning through him and finally he raises all his friends from their tombs.

5. You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit (Epistle – that the Spirit of God would redefine and empower the hearer's lived life as a Spirit filled and sacred thing.)

Paul speaks of a human being in ways we are not familiar with, especially in Lent. Paul speaks of the Christian expectation that we will see Christ and his Spirit showing up in our lives. Armenio is preaching to folks in prison – they know that they are in the flesh, it is as real as the bars on the doors. They are trapped in the reality of the flesh.

Paul points all of us, prisoners of every sort to another truth to speak, however. We are no longer of the broken and sinful flesh, but the living Spirit of Christ dwells within us. We are not rash to presume that we should see that sometimes in this sinner and saint life which we live. Paul knows that there really is a saint in there and he lives in this body of ours just as much as the old stinker does. Do we get what we expect in this? If we only look for old Adam, is that all we see? Do we need to trust the promise of our baptism a little more and look for that new guy too?

For Armenio's imprisoned men this has real traction. There is another way to live inside the prison and another way to live outside these walls. The Spirit of the living God has taken up residence in us and the old ways of the flesh are old. The new ways, the ways of Christ's Spirit, are that to which we are called.

6. It is better that one man should die for the whole people (Gospel – That the hearer would believe that the death and resurrection of Christ has saved the whole people, even this person.)

Addressing the cynical loss of hope, this sermon would assert the good news that Jesus death and resurrection is exactly what Caiaphas said it was, a death for the whole of the people, indeed for the whole of creation. It is one of those familiar ironic moments in the Gospels when the enemy gets is the most right of all the people in the text.

7. Vocation – God's Unwitting Servants
8. Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and their brother (That the hearer would be empowered by the Spirit of God to trust in God despite suffering)

This sermon notes that the friends of Jesus, beloved by him, also grieved, hoped that Jesus would show up in time, but he did not. Yet, their sorrow was turned to joy. We suffer and often in our suffering God works His kingdom mightily or gently. Suffering is not a sign of God's disfavor, but faith and God's Spirit enable us to trust and see our own suffering in light of Jesus' cross and resurrection.

Jesus seems like a poor friend here. Perhaps we need to let Jesus out of the friend box and think of his friendship differently. That could be much more helpful in fact.

9. I am the Resurrection and the Life (Gospel: that the Spirit of God would embolden the hearer to confess the presence of Christ even here.)

Martha thought that the resurrection happened at the end of time, far distant from her first century Bethany life. But Jesus, the resurrection and life, was standing right in front of her. This sermon would break down the great barrier. The "last day" of resurrection has already begun. It really began when this Jesus of Nazareth rose from his own grave on Easter morning. We are in His presence now! [This would build on baptism – we live the eternal life right now. We do not "see" death when we die, but we live.](#)

10. I AM (Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would call the hearer to faith in Christ Jesus)

This sermon is contending with the scandal of particularity. The world would have us doubt that Jesus is the I AM. After all, he was a carpenter, a peasant, who lived two thousand years ago. How can he be the solution to my life's deepest problems? How can faith in Jesus be something that makes any difference to a twenty-first century person such as myself? It defies any reasonable estimation.

Jesus claims to be the I AM. For folks in the audience of Jesus and John that was an explosive thing to say. That is what God said to Moses out of a bush many years ago. That was the name of God.

Reason suggests that to believe in a man who lived so many years ago is foolish. But these claims he makes render that skepticism a problem. If Jesus is that God – and you might want to go to the Gospel reading in the 1 year series, John 8, to hear Jesus make the claim in so many words. If Jesus really is that I AM, then his assault on sin, death, and devil on that cross does indeed address the problems of my life, of my family, of my city, and my world.

He brings the forgiveness and love which this benighted world so desperately needs, which I need. He has filled my life with himself in my baptism and in this sacrament of the altar. He comes to me and IS, HE IS the right now for me. The preacher will want to connect this as winsomely as he can to this life. Tell the stories of Jesus in the lives of the people that you know.