

Sermon March 29, 2020
Redeemer Lutheran Church

Grace, Mercy and peace, from God and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Word of encouragement in our time of separation, social distancing, and amid our worries for our own health, the health of our loved ones, and for the well-being of our society and the world.

While we continue our social distancing, we are sad because we cannot meet together, and cannot be with our family of faith.

Especially now, we feel more than ever the need to gather, to assemble in Jesus' name, to have fellowship in the Lord around the Word and the Sacraments, and console each other and encourage each other in person, but circumstances don't permit this.

We continue to follow the guidance of our local, state and national governments. Even though we are recording this in the sanctuary, the church doors are locked. There are not to be more than 10 people in this room at the same time. The church is officially closed, and yet we have also re-discovered in this time, and in these circumstances, that the church is not the building, and therefore not something that you can really close, for the church remains forever made up of the people who call Christ their Lord. So even in our digital gatherings, such as this one, we feel a qualified sense of joy in being able to see and hear from one another, but we hold onto the full joy we have in faith, that we are forever one in Christ, and that nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus, as Paul says in Romans ch. 8:

³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor

anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So dear church, you are not closed. Your congregation's physical plant is closed, and its programs are suspended, but the mission of the church lives on in your hearts and minds, and in your actions and life. As people of faith, you are open for God's mission, and in baptism you are called to remain open to the love of God and the reality of our human condition. We are called to share the love of God in Christ Jesus for those who suffer, those who mourn, those who fear. The situation is dire, but the Lord of life leads us into eternal life.

Look at the testimony of our lessons today. In a vision from God, the prophet Ezekiel is made to witness a valley of dried bones. They symbolize the destroyed kingdom of Judah, and its capital city Jerusalem. The dream of God's glorious city is dead. The prophet is grieving like the rest of the Babylonian exiles who were hoping for the restoration of the city and their civilization, but all he can see in Jerusalem is death, a pile of bones, a city that is a shadow of its former self, ravaged by the Babylonian empire and left for dead. The city of God is dead. Its future is closed. But the word of the Lord has infinite power, and by that word, God promises to bring new life to a pile of dried bones.

And about 500 years later, in our Gospel lesson for today, the need for God's word of power has come to bear on the human heart in a universal way. In this 11th chapter of John, we see that now, it's not a city, a nation, or a dream that is closed. It is the human heart itself that is closed, covered over in confusion, doubt, and morbid resignation. This is symbolized by the hearts of the disciples, the religious leaders, Lazarus's sisters and their grieving friends, and finally by Lazarus' tomb. Too many things here are closed off to God, and all because of the tomb. It was officially closed. But Jesus Christ is God's word spoken into the midst of our sin and fear of death. And Jesus must make his way through the confusion, doubt, and resignation to face death head on.

There may be much confusion and ignorance here, but there is no doubt about Lazarus. Lazarus was dead. The tomb was closed. In fact, it had been closed for 4 days already by the time Jesus arrived. It had been so closed, that everyone knew that if it were to be opened, there would be a horrendous stench. But when Jesus gets word of Lazarus' death, he waits. First we see the disciples' confusion; is

Lazarus dead or sleeping? Jesus can't even use sleep as a metaphor for death, because they take him literally. When he finally declares his intention to go to Bethany, which is so close to Jerusalem, his disciples protest because the religious leaders in Jerusalem, whom John calls "the Jews", are already plotting his death. If he goes to Bethany, he'll be risking his life. When he does draw close to Bethany, Martha comes to challenge him: IF you had been here, my brother would not have died. Jesus says he will rise again, but this simple statement of faith is not enough for Martha. She knows that already, that's not the issue for her. But what seems like faith in her, is not, for she has already accepted her brother's death as final. She does not see the power of life that Jesus is in his own being. The issue is not one of timing, but the will of God. What does God intend to do here? And are we able to see it? Likewise, Mary comes out to him on the road and says the same thing as Mary, but now surrounded by the mourners. Jesus witnesses the group of mourners, and his own emotions get to him. Indeed, he loves this man Lazarus and his sisters. He too shares their grief.

Now this story from Jesus' life in the Gospel of John is rich in meaning for us, particularly in our time. There are many teachings in this long chapter, too many to review in this sermon. The simple thread that we want to follow here is the way that Jesus has to push through all this human confusion, doubt and ignorance on his way to rescue Lazarus. The lesson we take here is that, in the end, whatever may separate us from Christ, Christ can overcome. Even the grave that holds us in its thrall is not strong enough to keep us from the love of Christ that is stronger than death.

IF we are honest, we find that those same obstacles that Christ confronted to get to Lazarus, still inhibit us today. The things that are closing down around us because of the destruction of this disease stand in the way of a life-giving faith in Christ's power to save.

Covid19 has forced the closure of many things in our life; spring routines, graduation plans, seasonal opportunities, all closed down. Likewise, relationships are under new stress, in our families and in our nation, and our anxiety about money, livelihood, career, and prosperity are eating away at our hearts and minds. We know things can close, never to be opened. We are watching it happen to many people and institutions in real time. And even if they were to be opened again, they wouldn't be the same.

In addition to these experiences, we have the specter of death to face. Death is the final closure, when all that was ceases to be, and the finality of the end of life sets in. Under normal circumstances, death is a traumatic event for families and individuals. But in the time of Covid19, death is complicated by the virus and the restrictions on our gathering. In my own family, we have had to struggle with this. My wife's aunt Anita died this past week. Under normal circumstances, we would have driven out to Pittsburgh for the funeral. Instead, they conducted the funeral with only 10 people present, and broadcast the funeral on Facetime so that we could watch it from home.

Our hearts reach out to God for answers in the face of death, answers that do not get a firm response. But in the lessons of scripture today, we do get the promise of God's action. In Ezekiel's vision, God speaks to the valley of dry bones, and they re-assemble themselves, sinews, cartilage, flesh and all. And finally, God speaks and his breath fills their lungs and they rise renewed.

This power that belongs to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is the same power at work in Jesus Christ, whom we see giving commands to those who lack faith at the door of Lazarus' tomb. Jesus commands them to open the tomb, then he gives thanks to the Father for hearing his prayer, and then he commands Lazarus to emerge. A commentary by the theologian Melinda Quivik points out that no one present, not the disciples, not the religious leaders, not Lazarus' sisters, not the mourners, and certainly not Lazarus, have any faith in what Jesus is about to do. No one expects any new life here. Death and its finality have everyone in its grip. But, Quivik writes, "Human belief is not the source of the rising. Jesus' oneness with the Father is the source of the rising."

And here faith becomes renewed. For faith grabs onto the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, and the oneness of the son and the father, of the unity of Jesus' vision with the vision of the God of Israel. This faith helps us not only see, but to expect the power of God's life over death. Jesus causes death to turn to life. It is something that most others in the story fail to believe, and it is something Martha and Mary come close to believing, but in Christ we are meant to see God's power over death. And in the events of Jesus' own death and resurrection, despite the neglect and doubt of many of these same people, we will see this power claim its victory.

Church, in this time of pandemic, of unparalleled uncertainty and fear, we find that we are like the faithless people of this story. Maybe we have rehearsed the faith of Martha and Mary in our Sunday morning piety, but under these new and scary circumstances, we too echo the words of fearful, doubting disciples. And especially now, in these days, we wonder if all we will see, repeated all around the world in devastating daily reports, are the doors of new tombs, closed to us and to our feeble faith. In the face of these challenges, our weakened hearts demand with Martha and Mary, Lord, if you had been here, this would not have happened.

But thanks be to God, who gives us faith when we ask, who gives us reason to believe even when we haven't asked, who brings life into the midst of the destruction we see, who frees people from their bindings every day. Jesus speaks to our hearts, not in rumbling words of thunder or lightening, but in the simple power of his command, to say to the dead, arise. Church, you have come to believe in his awesome power. Take heart, have no fear, and keep faith in the God of Israel, and in the power of Jesus Christ, who opens the tomb and brings us life everlasting. Amen.