

Lent 5, Year A
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
Sermon by the Rev. Catherine Tatem
March 29, 2020

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

It is difficult to celebrate nothing, and that is what we are being called to do while we self-isolate, self-quarantine. We are seeking the outcome that nothing will happen, and we don't celebrate nothing very well. I want to win! And we are motivated by flashy scoreboards and cheering crowds and now we are showing the most love that we can imagine by creating empty streets and empty stores and in this action our hearts are full of love. We want nothing to happen: no overwhelming crush on our hospitals and medical personnel, no lack of needed equipment, no chaos in the streets and no incomprehensible decision-making about who lives and who dies. I want to celebrate nothing.

We will soon be celebrating the greatest news ever, and we know it through an empty tomb. The women go to a tomb and find nothing – no body that was placed under 100 pounds of burial spices. In these days, my friends, we are connected to the most life-saving event that we know, and we are celebrating that the people found nothing except a folded linen burial cloth. (Folded? Why do we know that? That's another sermon.)

There is an eye exam called a depth of field test; perhaps you have taken one. To take this test, you sit in a chair pulled up to a machine, and one eye is covered, and it looks sort of like staring into the sky, and little dots of light appear up, down, left and right, at random. And every time you see a dot, you hit a button, a button like the “call nurse” button of a hospital bed. Mind you, your eye is looking straight ahead, and the test is determining how much vision, peripheral vision you have. It is a test for glaucoma and loss of sight. To me, it is one of the most stressful tests there is, because I am sitting on the edge of the chair and I am going to see those lights; I must win. If my eye strays off of the center dot, the test administrator says “look straight ahead,” and she catches me every time. I cannot use my other eye to help and those dots – there must be one coming – and I want that depth of field to be perfect, meaning full. Dots wherever they are supposed to be. For all of my anxiety and fervor, the test is: 1) out of my control, and 2) not about winning. It is about nothing; that is, determining that nothing is wrong. Or that something is wrong, that professionals can then address.

I find the depth of field test to be a little bit like these days: we are not in control of this invisible virus, and if our lives are about winning, it is not showy at all. We are called to look straight ahead while we see the dots of illness appearing in every direction: up, down, left, and right, and we are supposed to identify them ... and let professionals help in the ways that they can. We are to sit still so that nothing can happen. And it is not about winning in a way that looks full but in a way that looks like the greatest love that there is: an empty tomb, and empty hospital beds.

It is very difficult to stay at home, or to look at a screen for twenty minutes trying to anticipate the next dot, the next news report, the next calamity. We could lose hope, and today's readings

show us – implore us – not to lose hope at all. Those dry bones in the desert are the Israelites who have lost all hope.

But those bones, with the words of God spoken through a prophet, can live. Prophecy to the breath, Ezekiel. Prophecy to the breath that new life needs to come into those bones. Spirit, give the breath of life into those who have lost so much hope that they are like dry bones strewn about in the desert. Give those bones breath and sinews, hope and life in the Lord. For those of us who are not yet like those dry bones: anything and everything is possible; listen! Listen for God in all that we are – not – doing. Fill the streets and the stores and churches with our fervent prayer, our attention to God in whom all things are possible. Be active in faith; pull your faith into life, even from dry spots of unbelief.

Our faith and ourselves – we can be very dead and still be brought to life through Jesus. Lazarus, dead for four days, was “very” dead; in ancient times it was thought that the spirit leaves the body after three days. Lazarus, then, was a rotting, very dead, body of bones. And at the word of Jesus, Lazarus’ bones, like those in the desert, rattled, and sinews strengthened and he came to life. I think that his life was changed from his time in the tomb, from his time apart from the living, from those he loves, from the world.

Our isolation is much less than that of Lazarus and maybe less than that of the desert bones. Our call to new life is no less important. Breathe life into every day; rise up in the word of the Lord; prophesy, and live. Come out of the darkness in which we may find ourselves – the darkness, the tomb, the desert of despair, uncertainty, loneliness, and lack of control. Use your gifts in the way that God is calling you to use them; we will discover our gifts and be given new ones when we listen to God in prayer. We can act in these times, differently than we have before. Act: call one another; write notes – not calling it “snail mail” anymore, but a delightful surprise to someone else.

We are called today to awaken our faith, to live into being the church without worshipping in a building that we love and in which we find great meaning. We are grieving that loss. We long to see each other, to be together in worship “like we were before.” As our experiences shape us, our lives will be shaped by this pandemic. We will have losses greater than corporate worship. We will have, I hope, joys that bring new life to our lives. We have the opportunity to cultivate our relationship with God and with those with whom we are quarantined. Those relationships are woven together in a life of faith and practice.

As the question goes, “How, then, shall we live?” We awaken our practice of faith in our homes. Lent will conclude and Palm Sunday will happen and our Lord will die on the cross and he **is** risen. We will worship in new places and in new ways. Do not devoid yourselves of worship, of holy time, of nourishment from the word of God. My hope is that our personal faith will strengthen and that we will be closer in our relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. What creative uses of our gifts will we discover, will we use, now and when we come back together?

I encourage us to set up a holy place in our homes, and I will provide some thoughts and ideas on how to do that. As Jesus says many times throughout scripture: “Do not be afraid. I am with you.” People of God, in this time and in all times, these bones can *live*. Amen.