

Lent 5 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

This season of Lent, we have been focusing not only on acknowledging our sins, those times in our lives when we act in ways God would not have us act, or fail to act in ways God would have us act—but also on strengthening our faith, and gaining a deeper understanding of our Christian beliefs. We have talked about the importance of penitence and repentance, of acknowledging our sins and wrongdoings, turning away from them, and turning towards God, so that our faith is the centerpoint of our lives. We have talked about the importance of seeking God in our lives, especially in times of hardship and despair. We have talked about the assurance that God is always with us in the midst of our suffering, and that even though being a Christian does not always protect us from the pain of this world, it gives us assurance in the life of the world to come, where pain and sorrow will be no more than a distant memory. Yes the heart of our faith is the promise of everlasting life won for us through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and his resurrection. And the readings for today give us a glimpse of that promise, as well as a reassurance that God will follow through on this promise.

Though Christ opened the way of everlasting life, the promise of the resurrection was given to us earlier, in the Old Testament. In the reading for today, the prophet Ezekiel was led by the Spirit into a strange and destitute valley full of bones. These bones were completely devoid of life—Ezekiel describes them as “very dry”. God asks Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” And the obvious answer would seem to be “no. Of course they can't.” But Ezekiel knows that through God, all things are possible, and so he answers “O Lord God, you know.” And indeed, the God who made all of creation out of nothingness shows Ezekiel the truth—that God could lay sinews on the bones, and cause flesh to come upon them, and cover them with skin, and put breath in them, and they could live. Though the house of Israel doubted God and said “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely,” God shows Ezekiel the truth—that God's promises extend to his people even after death.

We see a glimpse of this promise again in the Gospel reading for today. In it Jesus has been traveling the land, teaching people about God and performing miracles. Yet while he was gone, his good friend Lazarus had fallen ill and died. Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, had sent a message to Jesus informing him of Lazarus' illness, but Jesus soon perceived that Lazarus had died in his absence. Though his disciples urge him to stay away, reminding Jesus that the last time he was in Judea he was almost stoned, Jesus dismisses the disciples' fears and begins his journey to Lazarus' home. The disciples seem certain that Jesus will be killed there, but Thomas urges them to follow—“Let us also go,” he says, “that we may die with him.” They finally arrive, but by the time they do, Lazarus had been dead for four days. When Jesus encounters Martha and Mary, both women make the same accusation (or simply observation depending on how you look at it). Both women tell Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” In the midst of their despair, Jesus comforts them with these 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.”

This promise that Christ makes is the cornerstone of our faith—the promise that, through Christ, even though we die in this life we will have life in the world to come. Jesus asks Martha, “Do you believe this?” and she responds, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” This is what we as Christians believe, and what happens next in the Gospel gives us assurance of this promise. Jesus asks to be brought to Lazarus. Though Lazarus has been dead for four days, Christ enters into his tomb. We are told Lazarus' body had decomposed to the extent that a stench now filled the tomb. If someone were to ask, “could this rotting body live?” the obvious answer would seem to be “no. Of course it can't.” Yet once again, just as we were shown in Ezekiel, we see that through God all things are possible. Jesus commands his dead friend, Lazarus, to come out, and Lazarus does. Lazarus, though he had been dead for four days, is resurrected through the power of Christ.

Though the resurrection of Lazarus is not quite the same as the resurrection in which we put our hope, as Lazarus was raised once again to mortal life, while we will be raised to life immortal, it shows us the power of God over the powers of death and assures us that even after death, we will not be separated from God, nor will we remain dead. And we will soon celebrate the event that shows us Christ's victory over death and the grave, the resurrection that is of the same type of resurrection that we can expect for ourselves, the raising from death into everlasting life—Christ's own resurrection after his sacrifice on the cross.

Though we sin and fail to live as God would have us live, though we will often fail to make our faith and God the centerpoint in our lives, though we will experience pain and suffering in this world, our souls remain in God's hands, and our sins and our pain will not carry over in the life to come. Though we do not know exactly what the next life will look like, we know that in the resurrected life we will continue to abide in God's love and cannot be separated from it. As Paul reassures us in his letter to the Romans, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you." It is this promise that strengthens us and motivates us to do the work of Lent—to identify our sins, turn away from our sins, and turn towards God. It is this promise that comforts us in the midst of the pain and suffering of this world. It is this promise that reassures us and gives us hope for the world to come. If we know that Christ will raise us up on the last day, we can put aside the cares and temptations of this world, seeking to follow Christ above all else. What we can gain through pursuit of money, and power, and selfish desires in this life pale in comparison to what is gained for us through Christ's passion and resurrection. And so, as Christians, we work to turn away from these worldly pursuits and turn towards God, seeking to do the will of God above all else, to prepare ourselves for the life of the world to come, everlasting life with one another, and with God. Amen.