

Sermon

Fifth Sunday in Lent

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

Church of the Incarnation

March 22, 2026

With the barrage of heavy news, I just wanted to get away. I wanted to see something that would bring me joy, would remind me that God is good, that people are good, that wildlife flourishes, that there is life and love in communities we build together, that there is hope in the darkness. We need to disengage and take breaks from time to time from the flood of information (and misinformation) so we don't get overwhelmed and just give up in despair. I hope you do that too. And so last week we drove to and spent a day at the Carrizo Plain Monument in central California, an arid but wildlife-filled basin between coastal mountain ranges.

Yet the ugly truth of today's lessons were in the back of my mind—in Israel, a valley of dry bones scattered by war awaits liberation from death, in the Psalm a sinner calls out of the depths for mercy and redemption, in Paul's letter, the vitality of the Roman church suffers over conflicts between Jews and Gentiles over circumcision and other rules, and Jesus' friend Lazarus lies entombed for four days while his family grieves. Indeed, many before us have known the ravages of death of body, of spirit, of communities, and of hope. Indeed, these scriptures presage Jesus' Holy Week journey.

St. Paul lays out the ultimate choice God gives us. "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Death, or life and peace. Choices are not always that clear, but we all know death when we see it or feel it—bodily death of a loved one or a friend, even pondering our own impending death, but also the death of hopes and dreams, death of the ways that make for life and peace—erosion of systems of justice, democracy, healthcare and education, violent conflicts and warfare that destroy communities and nations and world peace leaving valleys of dry bones. John Dear, a contemporary Christian theologian and activist for peace and human rights, speaks of a human "culture of death" whose credo is only "How much can I get?" Minds set on greed, lust and untethered wealth and power create social contracts with "methodologies of death" like military incursions and war, oligarchies of power and economic inequality, environmental exploitation and every injustice. But St. Paul reminds us that to set the mind on the Spirit is to choose life—the preservation of human dignity and freedom so all people and everything on this fragile, island earth thrive in peace and harmony.

In the scriptures today, we witness a nation of bones scattered in the desert—the remains of Hebrew people exiled in Babylon. Ravaged by a war, they await redemption. God asks Ezekiel, “O mortal, can these bones live?” In humility, the prophet replies, “O Lord, only you know.” Then God instructs the prophet to prophesy to the bones, “I will cause breath to enter and you shall live again,” beginning a process one theologian Collin Cornell calls a “bio rebuild.” God with the help of Ezekiel, prophets and others restores the ancient people to life.

We witness a second death. Jesus’ friend Lazarus has died. This event is a turning point in Jesus’ journey—from the “light” and “life” of healing, feeding, and other “signs” of his divine presence and power, to setting his path clearly toward the cross and resurrection “glory.” As Jesus walks to Bethany, where his friend is buried, warnings of Jesus’ impending death have grown stronger. Religious elites try to stone him to death and arrest him, yet he escapes. Lazarus’ sisters are grieving and his disciples have no idea what lies ahead. Yet Jesus commits himself to return to Bethany and Jerusalem, so confident of God’s power over death that he delays his return.

Yet that delay costs him dearly. Martha says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” So too, Mary later will utter the very same accusation. Their dismay even anger reflects a grief that screams at the unfairness of life cut short, a life that cannot be replaced, a death that was not deserved or in their eyes could never be justified. Mortals know this searing pain, this wound from death of a loved one. But Mary softens what seems like resentment, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him...I know that [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus responds, “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.” As quick as lightning, Martha, names Jesus “the Messiah, the Son of God” and rushes to tell her sister.

When Mary arrives, Jesus sees them wailing and becomes “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved,” a Hebrew phrase that one theologian interprets as “the sound an agitated but bridled horse makes.” A snort! Anger? Impatience? Or gut awareness of the “culture of death” he knows will hang him on a cross? Then Jesus weeps. Vulnerability. Humility. Trust. Jesus fully human. Broken, perhaps by his awareness that his own death awaits. Yet here is no despair, but action. Turning to God he prays. Turning to the gathered community he commands, “Take away the stone!” They obey. Jesus commands, “Lazarus, come out!” The clothbound man

stumbles forth. Jesus commands the community, “Unbind him and let him go.” They do.

Consider these two commands: First, “Take away the Stone!” Jesus doesn’t take away the stone. He asks those who love Lazarus to do it. “Unbind him!” Jesus doesn’t touch the cloths (unlike what happens in the tomb at his own resurrection), but charges the community to continue the miracle he began by touching the risen man in love and freeing him to live again. Live. Jesus brings life and meaning and joy to the lives of all who participate in the raising of Lazarus. So too Jesus commands us to take away the stones and unbind those that a “culture of death” hides away in caves, concentration camps, Gulags and detention centers so they can’t be seen—people exiled because of the color of their skin, language, gender preference, religion, ideology, mental illness, or poverty, people in foreign nations suffering trauma, persecution and death by instruments of war whose stories we never hear. “Unbind him, and let him go!” Jesus empowers his followers, us, to unbind the vulnerable, marginalized, poor, exploited and imprisoned children of God whose dignity has been bound and defaced by cloths of unjust political and economic oppression.

At a time when we might easily tire or despair, The theologian Thomas Merton’s “letter to a young activist,” encourages us not to focus on the “hope of results” but “on the value, the truth of the work...the real hope is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see.” “Lazarus, come out!” Live fearlessly into God’s hopes for us and the world—love of friends and family, work that gives us meaning and joy, safe and healthy communities, a healthy planet, a democracy with freedoms to worship and determine our collective future. Come out and do not fear because a community of love is here to respect you, feed you, heal you, shield you from danger and free you to discover new life in the Spirit.

Live! Live! Live! Jesus is “the light of all people,” the bread of “life,” “the way, the truth and the Life, “the Resurrection and the life.” Through Jesus Christ we have life not only in heaven but life in the here and now. I invite you to take your bulletin insert home and in the lessons circle the words, “life,” “live,” “breath,” “wind,” and “Spirit.” Then pray, how do those passages speak to you? Whenever Jesus unbinds us from guilt, fear, anger, or grief, Jesus sets us free to choose life in the Spirit. What does that look like to you?

There are so many paths we can take! We can roll away the stone for all imprisoned by the “culture of death” by advocacy, non-violent resistance and non-

cooperation. We can unbind our neighbor's clothes of shame and suffering with respect, honor, and friendship as well as food and personal safety. Scriptures today create an unforgettable image of a "culture of life." In Ezekiel, the Gospel, and Paul's letter, God will not complete miracles of resurrection without prophets, pastors, and communities of love like this church here. Facing a culture of death, this is what gives me hope: communities of "resurrection and life" that snort like Jesus, pray and rise with mercy, healing and grace in peaceful resistance to the culture of death.

The disciples feared what would happen to Jesus if he were to go to Bethany, and rightfully so. Fear binds us in knots, even despair, but courage, strength and hope grow like wildflowers in the presence of the Spirit and community. When Holy Family, the church I served for nine years closed, I hid away in grief and shame. Prayer, worship in many churches, a sailing community and eventually the call to write a book in the company of new friends at Boston University brought me back to life. Whatever we call them—prophets, angels, friends, neighbors, church, these are like sheets of rain filling a 3,000 acre dry salt lake bed in the California desert with water and fields of yellow wildflowers stretching as far as the eye can see. Bees followed us as we walked dirt paths among them. Billions of dead seeds had been wakened by winter rain, by love, to adorn this glorious valley and hillsides.

"To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace...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."