

Sermon – John 11:1-45; Ezekiel 37:1-14  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
5 Lent – Year A  
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### “Called Out by the Word”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The three friends looked forward to their annual adventures, opportunities to reconnect each year after their lives had gone in separate directions following college. This was to be their most arduous challenge yet, a hike through the Mojave Desert. They arrived at the trailhead of the Pacific Coast Trail, only to find a mysterious stranger who offered to grant them one wish each. “In addition to what you’ve already packed,” he told the three friends, “I will gift you with any single item you want to help get you through this hot, dusty land.” The friends looked at one another, astonished and mystified. The first answer quickly: “I know how thirsty I’ll be; I wish for a water bottle that never runs out of water.” The stranger handed over just such a bottle, replying, “You have chosen wisely.” The second, knowing he could share his friend’s water now, asked for something different: “I’ll take a bottle of sunscreen that will never run out.” This, too, was granted. The third friend’s eyes twinkled with wisdom in the glow of the hot sun. With an air of certainty, he spoke: “I wish for a car door.” His friends looked at him, incredulous. The stranger granted the wish, but he, too, was curious: “Why in the world would you want to lug a car door through the desert?” “Isn’t it obvious?” the man answered. “Whenever it gets too hot, I can just roll down the window!”

2. Ezekiel, exiled from his home with the rest of his people, is brought in a vision to the edge of a dry, deserted valley. This is no joke; neither is it an adventure. It is a desperate moment. The hot air is still, without the hint of wind. All that's in the air is death, the prophet's vision dominated by bones, as far as his eyes can see. Is this a vision of the future? The coming end of his people, left to die in a foreign land? Is there hope? Can these bones live? Ezekiel fears the obvious answer and defers to the Lord: "O Lord GOD, you know."
  
3. Mary and Martha see not a vision, but the reality of death unfolding in real life. Their brother, Lazarus, the one whom Jesus loves, has taken ill. Jesus arrives too late, at least by their reckoning. There's nothing to be done for their brother but give him a burial and mourn his death. Is there no hope for the future? Doesn't Martha believe in the resurrection? Yes, sure, but it seems a far-off hope, a prophecy as yet unrealized. All she can see clearly is death, which has come to claim her beloved sibling far too soon, buried now four days. Four days. Too long for the dead man's spirit to linger; too long to hope for resuscitation. Lazarus, like the bones in Ezekiel's vision, was not simply "mostly dead," to borrow a phrase from Billy Crystal's Miracle Max in *The Princess Bride*. No, Lazarus was *dead* dead. Martha is nothing if not a realist. She knows that it is too late.
  
4. While Jesus knows that this will lead to God's glory, and to Martha being the one in John's Gospel to offer the christological confession that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, Jesus does not gloss over Martha's grief. He joins her in grief. He weeps, for he, too, loved Lazarus. He weeps, for he loves Martha and Mary. He weeps, because he is God, and God loves God's people. Jesus does not stand far off, at arm's length from our sorrow and pain. He joins us in our grief, the divine heart of the Triune God breaking open in compassion. What happens next is not so much a miracle meant to amaze as

it is a protest against the power of death, offered in solidarity for those who mourn in the dry, dusty valley of death.

5. Jesus joins us in our grief and thank God for that. When our hearts are most broken, God is most present for us. But if that were all Jesus did, it would be cold comfort, indeed. When God's people were lost in exile and all hope seemed lost, God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and to prophesy to the breath. With Word and wind, echoing God's creative work at the beginning of creation, the prophet sees death itself undone – a foretelling of the future when God will act decisively to bring life out of death. The prophecy is brought to life in the raising of Lazarus. Jesus, the Word of God enfleshed, speaks. Lazarus can do nothing but obey, the breath of life filling his lungs as he steps out of eternal night and into the light of resurrection dawn.
  
6. Of course, this new beginning for Lazarus is the beginning of the end for Jesus. This world is so entrapped within death's power that the promise of life is threatening. So Jesus, too, will die. But there, deserted by nearly everyone, forsaken, he feels, even by his Father, Jesus joins himself to our deepest pain and sorrow. And three days later, he will show us that our grief, though very real, is not the only emotion left to us; that death, though very real, is not final and does not get the last word. As Lazarus is unbound from his graveclothes, we, too, are unbound from the power of sin and death. We look across the valley and feel the wind of the Spirit beginning to stir. We look to the cross and see the heart of God breaking open as Christ joins us in our grief. We look to Jesus and see the great I AM who is the resurrection and the life for all who believe. Christ stands before you today, calling you out of your grave and into newness of life. The fresh air of the Holy Spirit is on the move. Roll down a window? No. Let's roll away the stone. Take a deep breath, and step into the life God has come to share with you, on both sides of the grave. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.