

**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45; Psalm 130**

Let's say for a moment that there is no God. Which probably isn't the way that most priests begin their sermons, but I am doing it for a reason, and so let's say *for the sake of an illustration* that there is no God. And then let's say that I come in here and dump a bunch of skeletal remains in the middle of the floor. And I say, okay, let's everyone take turns speaking to and breathing on these bones and see who can resurrect these bones back to life. And each one of us takes turns speaking to and breathing on the bones and nothing happens until one of us does this, and the bones rise to life. One person speaks to the bones and they rattle and start to stand erect and the sinew and the flesh come back upon them and the one person who was able to do this breathes on them again, and they are filled with life, fully restored. The bones return to the living beings they once were because of that one person.

Now, how would we feel about that one person who did this? Might we feel a little in awe of that person? Might we even be fearful, you know, like "wow – what kind of power is emanating from that person" – and step back giving them a wide berth when they moved towards us? Might we even bow? Might we clasp our hands incredulously in delight with joy and shout praises at them? Might we start to tell everybody we met about what this person did and who this person is so that everybody would know their name? Might we try to get everybody we know to come and see this person because this person is capable of raising the dead back to life? Might we not be anxious to glorify the person who can raise the dead and might we not also be anxious to bring people to be helped by this person? Might we not do this? And so, do you see where I am going with this?

I was browsing online and happened upon Sunday service picture postings from several small churches in our area and in every single service there was only a handful of people in the pews, and I thought to myself, why is not every single pew in our small-town community churches completely filled? What is going on that our churches are dying? Why are we drying up like dead bones? I mean, it's not happening in all churches. We just witnessed the Asbury Revival. But it is happening in many churches or parishes around the country, you know, many local churches are drying up.

And I'll tell you why this is happening. This is happening because of us. God's people. Not all are to blame perhaps, but many of us. Because we are losing sight of the importance of preaching the resurrection of the dead in its connection to belief in Jesus Christ. Last week, we saw Jesus spit in mud and tell a man blind from birth to go wash and be restored. And he was. But Jesus did not just leave it there. He later sought the man out to ask him to confess his belief in Jesus. Why? Because *confessing belief in Jesus* eternally saved the formerly blind man to be resurrected to eternal life. Jesus just didn't heal the man physically he also saved his soul.

We all pray for healing. We all care so much to see one another physically healed. We will even tell someone who doesn't go to church or profess a faith in Jesus that we will pray for them and "oh, isn't that nice of us." But do we ever go the extra mile to seek them out later in order to prioritize asking them if they believe that Jesus is the Resurrection and the life and that whoever believes in him though they die yet will they live? Like do we even bother to share that not only are we going to pray for their physical healing but that if they have a minute or two to spare, if they and we are not entirely too busy, do we make even the smallest of efforts to tell them we know the One who is able to resurrect them to eternal life and we'd like to tell them about this Person? Or are we hiding our light under a basket like a well-kept comfortable secret of truth that we are just sitting upon in our cushioned *exceedingly spacious* pews while the rest of the world is drying up like dead bones? Do we give others the opportunity to come to know and confess belief in Jesus? Scripture tells us: "if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Do we *bother* to tell anybody this?

And so, our scriptures have me significantly concerned today. And I'm as guilty of this as some of the rest of you may or may not be. Given I have never preached a sermon that I did not first need to hear. And I am guilty because Jesus says to us today: "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." And so, what is it that Jesus is saying to us by saying this? Well...Jesus made this statement right before he goes to raise Lazarus from the dead. And he makes

the statement after he intentionally delays going to see Lazarus because he wants for Lazarus to be dead when he gets there. Jesus knows Lazarus is so sick that he is going to die. And he waits and he tells his disciples that he is glad Lazarus is dead so that, what? So that he can raise Lazarus to live a while longer and just heal him for a bit and then leave it at that? No. Jesus says, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, *so that you may believe.*" The whole point of resurrecting Lazarus was not so they could all dry their eyes and have dinner together and cling to one another for the rest of their short mortal lives, the point of resurrecting Lazarus was so that people would *believe that Jesus had the power to resurrect the dead.* Jesus himself says this today. Jesus prays aloud to the Father saying: "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that *they may believe* that you sent me." Jesus called upon the Father and healed Lazarus so that the crowd standing at the tomb would *believe* Jesus to be the promised Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings who will return to reign on the new heaven and the new earth preparing an eternal home for everyone who believes.

Martha knew of this promise of the returning and reigning Messiah who would be able to resurrect the dead because she says to Jesus, "I know [my brother] will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." And what is the last day? The last day is after Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead, that is the last day, right after which he creates a new heaven and a new earth. It's the last "day" of this present earth. And this present heaven. Because we are promised a new heaven and a new earth. But so, all the Jews knew of this promised Messiah who would raise the dead on the last day and Jesus *today* raises Lazarus to enable them *to believe* that he is Messiah. And Jesus does this incredible miracle in front of a bunch of people so that in turn, these people who know Jesus to be the Resurrection and the Life might actually tell others about it – that this good news might spread! And it did spread. This is why shortly thereafter we see a "large crowd" waiving palm branches during the Triumphal Entry which we will reenact next week shouting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" They were associating Jesus with the name of the Lord. Because He *is*. For as we are told today in the Gospel: "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, *believed*

*in him.*” The purpose of raising Lazarus from the dead was so that people would believe Jesus to be God so that they would be saved for all eternity.

Today, Jesus comforts Martha saying, Martha, your brother will rise again. And as we just discussed, Martha responds with, I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. But so, Martha had this faith that God would do this, but she did not yet fully understand how or even *through whom* God would do this. Martha and Mary were calling Jesus “Teacher” at this point. In fact, Martha does so today. They knew Jesus was from God and that he had the words of God and so they called him Teacher, but I don’t think they fully understood who Jesus is until today. Because today Jesus looks Martha straight in the face, maybe even takes her face in his hands, and says, Martha: “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. Do you believe this?” Jesus, right here, is giving Martha the opportunity to make a statement of faith and believe in him and be saved and she responds with: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Jesus was about the business of not only physically healing and restoring but about leading people in a confession of faith that he is our Savior in order that they would be saved. And so, when Jesus says to his disciples, there are only 12 hours of light in every day, he is saying, to them and to us, what are you doing with your time? “*You have and know the Light of the world, but you are leaving people in darkness,*” says Jesus to his disciples. Because today we see that the disciples were concerned about going back to Judea where Martha and Mary lived, given the Jews had just tried to stone Jesus to death. Their thoughts were more on playing it safe than going to Lazarus or evangelizing anybody. But Jesus says: There are people in Judea stumbling in darkness because the Light of the World is not in them. “Let us go to Judea again.”

“Let us go again to the ones stumbling in darkness,” says Jesus. No matter the risk. And just as Jesus exemplified, the Apostle Paul had this same mindset. In fact, Endicott Peabody, the builder of this building, reveals in his diary that he named this parish, St. Paul’s, because of all the Apostles, Endicott believed Paul to be the preeminent missionary. And mission-minded Paul says to the Roman

gentiles today: “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.” Paul was out preaching the resurrection of the dead through Christ Jesus out in the gentile streets. Because Paul considered this news to be *somewhat significant* and *good enough to share*. Even if he be thrown in prison and have his head lobbed off with a sword for it. And he did get thrown in prison and his head was lobbed off with a sword for it.

And so, this is why I am concerned. Our pews are not full because we as Christ’s disciples are not doing our job, because who wouldn’t want to know they can have eternal life if we tell them it is available to them, and who wouldn’t be a little curious to learn more about the Person who can raise them to eternal life if we invite them to hear about Him? Yes, some people will respond like Pharisees in unbelief, but some *will believe* and *that* is how we bring Glory to God. Because filling our pews is not about putting money in the plate. Church should never be about who puts money in the plate. We don’t even pass the plate. If the walls of St. Paul’s crumble, then when Jesus comes again, he can resurrect this building if he so chooses. What we care about is not *lining our coffers* but *emptying coffins*. We care to be doing what Jesus has commissioned us to do by telling others that Jesus is *the way the truth and the life* and nobody comes to the Father *but by him*. And if we were doing this, this holy space we call St. Paul’s would be jam-packed with stumbling people becoming *believers*. But we get up every day and how is it that we are spending our 12 hours? Like, “Oh, first I’m gonna have my coffee, maybe walk the dog, I gotta make the bed, brush my hair, I have several errands, and then I’m going to fill my evening with some entertainment, maybe some television, or I’ll go out with my friends...” While Jesus is saying to us: “There are people walking around stumbling all over this place, which is true, just look outside all the local bars here in Tombstone, but there are others – I’m not picking on the drunk people because Jesus is using a very broad metaphor about stumbling around in darkness today. And actually, Jesus spent a lot of time with drunkards because at least they would listen to him. But Jesus went also *to all* who were hurting and drying up and dying of thirst. Because Jesus said it isn’t the healthy that need a physician but the sick. I look around this parish and I see spiritually healthy people and I see Jesus

saying *to us*: “there are those walking at night stumbling because the light is not in them – and so let’s go!!!”

We possess the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 4:6), and we aren’t sharing it. *Not enough anyway*. And why? Is it because we fear being accused of proselytizing? But Jesus said, “Go into *all* the world and preach the Gospel to *all* creation,” (Mark 16:15). And so, I’m thinking that Tombstone falls into the category of “all.” And again, Jesus says, “Go and make disciples of all nations,” (Matt 28:19). And so, what about *our neighborhood* and what about *our nation*?

*Amen.*