

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, April 2, 2017)

Texts: The scriptures for this Sunday were presented in dramatic fashion. Here is the original text as found in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Ezekiel 37:1-14: The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD."

John 11:1-45:

The Death of Lazarus

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to

Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "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." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Jesus Weeps

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they

thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "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." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

The Plot to Kill Jesus

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Homily by Pastor Donald: **"Raised Up: All Hope Lies in You"**

The stories of Ezekiel and the dry bones and the raising of Lazarus from the dead touched me deeply this week, as I explored what it means to be hopeful in the midst of such devastation and sorrow. So many people around our world today are experiencing great sorrow as wars and famines, slavery and torture and all other kinds of ills continue to persist and even thrive in the 21st century. It really doesn't take too much imagination as we witness the atrocities broadcast every night on our screens to picture people mourning over a city, a hillside or a beach strewn with dead bones and wondering where God is.

In our own country, those who felt desperate about their own welfare and lack of employment and experience fear about who is crossing our borders, elected a president they HOPED would rectify some of the ills in our own society. While others, experiencing this presidency in its infancy are filled with fear over what is happening to the safeguards put in place regarding climate change and look for HOPE that walls will not be built to keep others out. No matter what our political affiliation, I'm sure all of us wonder what can happen in a country and a world so deeply divided in its politics, religions and ways of living on this planet we all share.

And then, suddenly, here comes Jesus. Here comes our ever living, ever loving, ever present God, prompting us to rise up, commanding us to come out of the cave, covering us with love and weeping with us as we weep and listening to our lamentations as we mourn, understanding our deepest needs and never leaving us alone.

In our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum this week we were reminded that, “both Ezekiel and John share stories that seem beyond hope. The story of the raising of Lazarus and the story of the Valley of Dry bones in Ezekiel are both stories that show time and situation have no bearing on the power of God or Jesus in offering – new life and hope where humans can see none...We are invited to not give in to despair but to trust that with God all things are possible.”

This is the foundation of our faith and that which will take us through every valley we experience in life. God is with us through each valley we cross as the shadow of death looms large. God is with us as we climb every mountain, unable to see the top and wondering if we will ever get over. God is with us as we wander each desert, weak from hunger, consumed by thirst and tempted to listen to the voices that would bring us down, plow us under and leave us to die. This is the journey the Christ took during his short life on this planet and the only way he was able to see it through was to realize that presence of his Abba, his God, within and without assuring him as we are assured that God will never leave us alone nor forsake us.

Confronted with a valley of dry bones, Ezekiel must have been profoundly discouraged. How can such a sight bring anything but despair and hopelessness? But in this very place as in the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead, God’s presence and God’s light comes to fullest fruition. Your mortal ways of understanding are not my ways, God says. You may not be able to see life in death, but I do. And no matter what your belief of bones being covered with flesh or dead men rising up from graves, God holds out the hope of new life, new possibility, new understanding that resurrection is possible even when our minds cannot comprehend it.

“Everyone who believes in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this? “

“Yes, Master. All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Song of God who comes into the world.”

So we will stand with Martha who believes. And, as Craig Barnes writes in *The Christian Century*, “we will [also] take our stand beside Ezekiel and proclaim our hope to the dry bones, "Thus, says the Lord, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live!" You who gave up hope, who gave up dreaming -- who have settled for a comfortably routine life of work, bills and dirty laundry. You who think your best years are behind you. You who think the Lord God has forgotten all about your little life.

To you, we say, "Arise!" Arise from the heap of discarded dreams. Arise to discover that the Holy Spirit is breathing life back into you. Arise to live with magnificent hope! Because the world is dying for you to believe God is not done.”

Amen.