

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fifth Sunday in Lent – Year A

RCL Readings – Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45.

ACNA Readings – Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 6:15-23; John 11:1-44.

Introduction. The 5th Sunday of Lent is also known as Passion Sunday and marks the beginning of Passiontide. Passiontide is the last two-week period of Lent and includes Holy Week; Palm Sunday is the second Sunday of Passiontide. In all honesty, it is not a well-known period of the liturgical calendar. The purpose of Passiontide is to share in the Messiah's journey toward the cross. As the disciples of Jesus ran away from the cross, we require ourselves to run towards it looking also beyond it to the resurrection.

Common Theme. Lent has been a period of introspection, prayer – and in some cases fasting – as we journey towards the Cross of Calvary. We know that the death and shame of the cross of Jesus is victory and life for us, and we all look forward to the redemption encapsulated in Resurrection Sunday. Resurrection and hope are common themes in our readings for this Passion Sunday. Protestant theology can have a tendency to narrowly focus on the individual relationship we have with God, and thus when we think of resurrection we may only consider our personal individual experience. To the ancient world, faith was something that belonged to and was shared by a community. Our readings also reflect on resurrection at the national scale and restoration not only to new life but also to an ancient homeland.

Ezekiel 37:1-14. The prophecy shown to Ezekiel in chapter 37 is known as the 'vision of the valley of dry bones'; although the text itself does not say specifically that it was a vision. In the text, the hand and Spirit of the Lord take Ezekiel to an unknown large valley to see a glimpse of the prophetic future.

One Jewish tradition locates this as the plains of Shinar and the site of the Tower of Babel. The plain of Shinar and the story of Babel is rife with rebellion and highlights the fallen state of man. The visible bones in the valley are not only quite dead but having never been buried there is also a sense of public disgrace as they had not been given a proper burial.

Ezekiel is addressed by the Lord as 'son of man' (*ben adam*), which in this context carries the meaning of mortal or human being. This is in contrast to the term 'son of man' (*bar enosh*) as referenced in Daniel, which there carries a supernatural meaning of an eschatological nature. When Jesus refers to Himself as the son of man it is in reference to Daniel and not simply as a mortal human man in Ezekiel.

God asks the prophet to speak life to the dead bones. God, himself, is light and life who could have easily spoken words of life over the bones and brought resurrection himself. Instead, the Lord chooses to partner with a human prophet who will speak on his behalf. This is something we have seen since the Garden of Eden in that God has always desired a partnership with Man. God created the universe and holds dominion over all things, yet also tasked Adam with sharing in that dominion. Heaven and Earth so often work together.

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Ezekiel initially speaks to the bones as commanded, resulting in a valley full of revived, activated bodies with no breath in them. Ezekiel then speaks to the four winds to breathe into the bodies. Breath in Hebrew is also the same word for spirit, which leads many commentators to reflect on the need for the work of the Holy Spirit in any act of physical or spiritual regeneration.

The literal text of Ezekiel describes these now living beings as representing the Jewish people, whom God says are the whole House of Israel, and not just the southern kingdom of Judah. The significance here is that the resurrection of the valley of dry bones occurs at the national level. The national restoration to life of the Jewish people includes God putting his Spirit in them. Then, following full restoration, there is a physical return to the Land of Israel. God has promised the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, and the hope of the prophets honours that promise.

Psalm 130. Psalm 130 is one of a few prayers collectively called the ‘penitential psalms’. The designation comes from the 6th Century by a Christian roman scholar called Cassiodorus. It is also one of the 15 psalms known as the psalms of Ascent, traditionally sung by pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem for the annual festivals. The psalm is full of hope and wonder at the goodness of God and his unfailing love.

It begins with a plea for the mercy of God and ends with the declaration that God will indeed redeem the people from their sins. The initial cry for help is described as coming from the ‘deep places’. These ‘depths’ could be physical in nature – such as a place of real overwhelming danger – or spiritual in nature – such as a place of deep confusion, doubt, or despair. In some other psalms – such as Psalm 86:13 – the deep places are linked to Sheol – the grave.

In the context of the theme of resurrection and hope, this psalm reminds us that we can have a restored and renewed relationship with God. The psalm is a personal prayer of hope through the consistent use of singular personal pronouns. When we pray this psalm, we can cast ourselves into the whole experience of the psalm. Though we might be in a dark place and at a spiritual low, we have the hope of forgiveness and the bright future of life from the dead.

Romans 8:6-11. Paul provides some good advice on determining whether our walk with the Lord is carnal or spiritual. In verse five, Paul says that the tension between the flesh and the spirit is played out in the mind, but in verse six, we see that the battle of the mind spills over into our real life. Our hearts and minds are inextricably linked to how we live out our daily lives. Do we live lives of generosity, humility, and kindness, or do we consistently place ourselves above our neighbours? Do we long to see ourselves retired safely in a large house with a sizeable pension – and work towards that – or do we desire to see the church full of the next generation – and use our wealth accordingly?

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These are honest personal questions that we cannot ignore as the result is too important. As we search ourselves for the answers, Paul reminds us that we have the gift of the Spirit of God within us. All believers in God have this gift, which works to give us new life in this mortal realm. The body of earthly flesh that we have in this life is actually 'dead' – although not literally – but in an eternal spiritual sense. Paul is describing eternal life – not in the future post-resurrection sense – but in the here and now. We can and should live out a resurrection life empowered by the Spirit of Christ (Holy Spirit) right now. It's a gift from God to do so!

John 11:1-45. The resurrection of Lazarus is the seventh miracle of Jesus in the gospel of John. Resurrections had occurred, albeit infrequently, in the Hebrew Bible. There is even the strange occurrence of a dead man coming back to life after having been thrown into Elisha's grave (2 Kgs 13:20). However, there is no parallel of someone coming back to life after so long, with the deceased Lazarus being in the tomb for four days.

Lazarus is an important disciple in the life of Jesus. He resides in the village of Bethany which is Hebrew for 'House of the Poor'. Although it appears that Lazarus was not actually counted among the poor. He has a private tomb – something only the rich could afford – and his sister Mary has an alabaster jar of expensive perfume. Certainly not common property for the poor community! When Jesus would journey to Jerusalem, it appears that he would often lodge with Lazarus. The relationship is highlighted when Mary and Martha send for Jesus saying: the one whom you love is sick. In the Western tradition, the disciple whom Jesus loved is often referred to as John. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, this verse is used as the prooftext that Lazarus is the disciple whom Jesus loved.¹

The attention to the timing of four days is important in the narrative. In Jewish tradition in the late 2nd Temple period, there was the belief that the soul of the individual would remain close to the body for up to three days hoping to return to the body. This may explain why Jesus chooses to delay his journey to Lazarus by remaining two more days and not coming immediately. The resurrection of Jesus himself is proof that the gospel is true. For if the resurrection does not occur, then our hope is in vain. In his conversation with Martha, who knew of his healing powers, Jesus declares that he is the resurrection. The resurrection is more than an event or something that is going to happen. The resurrection is a person!

To know Jesus and have a personal relationship with him is to know and experience resurrected new life. Here Jesus demonstrates quite convincingly that he has the power over life and death. If he will restore life to his friend in this world, then how much more will he restore our life in the world to come? No one of course asked Lazarus if he wanted to be brought back to life. There is a tradition that says that

¹ Interestingly, the phrase the disciple whom Jesus loved only appears after the resurrection of Lazarus and not before.

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following his resurrection, Lazarus never smiled again and that on his tomb are inscribed the words: the man who died twice. He will also be the man who resurrected twice!

ACNA Readings

Romans 6:15-23. Paul is adamant that the lifestyle of a spirit-filled believer does not include habitual sin. He brings in the metaphor of a slave to describe a spiritual principle. One way or another, we are going to serve somebody or something. Whatever we present ourselves to obey is the thing we are slaves to. If I consistently obey my desire for alcohol, then by Paul's definition I am a slave to the drink! Using the word slave or slavery is a loaded term these days and has the possibility to *trigger* people, even though it's a biblical truth.

Simply saying that we are 'free in Christ' does not mean we can do anything we want. Freedom is not unfettered access to a life of self-gratification. Freedom also has boundaries. What are those boundaries and who decides them? Obviously, the one doing the saving gets to decide the boundaries of the new life. Salvation includes obedience to Jesus our king. Once we have been set free from our former sinful lifestyle we are adopted into this new righteous lifestyle by the grace of God. The one that Jesus ordained for us to live out.

In verse 19, Paul apologizes for using the human term slavery as his metaphor illustration. Probably many from the early community in Rome were current or former slaves, and so the term was quite personal. However, the ugliness of human slavery does not hide the spiritual truth that even as a resurrected people we continue to be slaves to God. Salvation does not make us equal to God. Instead, as Hebrews 5:9 says, he (Jesus) became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.