

HEAR MINISTRIES

SERMON FOR **SUNDAY, March 22nd, 2026**

Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

Sermon recorded by: Tammy Springer

Prayer: Father, You opened the eyes of the blind, made the lame to walk and the dead to walk again. Strengthen the Spirit of Christ living within each of us, so that we may find Your abundant, kingdom-building life. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in Your sight, our Lord and Redeemer. Amen.

In 2022, a 27-year-old man collapsed after overdosing on heroin and cocaine. Paramedics gave him the naloxone injection, and he recovered enough to walk to the ambulance. He went into cardiac arrest during the ride to the hospital. After 25 minutes of resuscitation efforts, the patient was verbally declared dead. Later, in the hospital, a nurse noticed a rhythm on the heart monitor and resuscitation was resumed. Despite having been dead for several hours, the man was brought back to life and fully recovered!

Perhaps you have heard other stories like this one. In the medical field it is referred to as the “**Lazarus Syndrome**,” which is defined as “**the spontaneous return of cardiac activity after the patient has been pronounced dead.**” Several books have been written and movies made of just such happenings over the decades and centuries.

This morning we have **two of the most amazing readings** from Scripture **that talk of resurrection and the power of God to bring life from death.** The **Ezekiel** text describes the **resurrection of the Israelites**, symbolized by the dry bones that are brought back to life. In **John**, we hear of the **resurrection of Lazarus**. Both accounts emphasize the ultimate victory of life over death and the promise of eternal life for believers.

The **reading from Ezekiel is talking about the death of a nation (Israel)**, the end of a culture – of memories, of a whole people reduced to dead bones by their exile from their own land into Babylon. (The Biblical Babylon is located today in modern Iraq, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, near the town of Hillah. It is a real place and is still there today.)

Ezekiel was a prophet during the time the Israelites were taken captive by the Babylonians. The kingdom of Judah had fallen and the kingdom of Israel had fallen about 130 years prior to that. The Babylonian army killed many in the army of Judah and then took captive the people they thought were most intelligent or had the most skills. (Daniel and his friends were taken during this time.) **Ezekiel had a vision** where the Spirit of the Lord brought him into a valley filled with bones. These bones had been in the valley for a long time, and the Bible tells us they were very dry. There was absolutely zero life left in the valley of dry bones. I wonder how Ezekiel felt as he looked at the hopelessness of that valley? **The whole nation of Israel had reached a point where they no longer mattered to anyone, including themselves.**

Think today of **what is happening in the Middle East.** People, like the Israelites in Ezekiel, who find themselves cut off, without hope, no longer counting for anything or mattering to anyone. Some time ago there was a film about the end of whole communities in the North East as the coal industry was decimated. Others might feel the same about the state of the Church at large today, as many drift away from the Truth of God's Word. It is the experience of a kind of social grief, a loss of identity.

God asks Ezekiel if the bones could live. Ezekiel replies, "*Sovereign Lord, You alone know.*" (Ezekiel 37:3) Step by step, the Lord walks Ezekiel through the miracle. **First**, the Lord tells Ezekiel to **prophesy to the bones.** (Ezekiel 37:4) The bones then begin to come together! Sinews and muscles form. The dry bones are transformed into what looks like a stationary army of people! **Then**, the Lord tells Ezekiel to **prophesy to the breath.** (Ezekiel 37:9) The word used here is an important Hebrew word, "*ruach*," which can *mean wind, breath, life or spirit.* In fact, the word *ruach* is also used in this account to describe the Spirit of the Lord that brought Ezekiel into the valley in the first place. ***Ruach* is the wind that hovered over the waters in the story of creation.** God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath, the *ruach*, and **when he does, the breath of life enters the multitude of bones!** They stand, and are alive!

To make sure Ezekiel doesn't miss the point, the Spirit of the Lord tells him, "*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, prophesy, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.'*" (Ezekiel 37:11-12) And God does, eventually, bring the Jewish people back to Israel.

This miracle follows a similar pattern in the story of Lazarus. The story of **Lazarus, closer to home, is the story of heart-wrenching personal loss.** Lazarus is dead. He will never

come back, or so they think. They will never again be able to hear him talk or hear his footsteps or hear that little tune he whistles.

When Lazarus becomes ill, his sisters, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus. (John 11:3) **Jesus does not respond immediately** (John 11:6), **not because He doesn't care, but because He knows what He is called to do.** He follows the movement of the Spirit and journeys to Bethany, the home of Lazarus and his family. By the time Jesus gets there, Lazarus is not just dead, but he has been dead for four days! **This is an important detail** because in the Jewish tradition they believed that the soul left the body after three days. So, the fact that Lazarus had been dead for FOUR days when Jesus got there, John makes it very clear that Lazarus was REALLY dead!

I think it's interesting to see how Jesus' disciples respond to the news of Lazarus' illness (John 11:7-16). Like most of us, **they operate at the physical, literal level.** When Jesus says that Lazarus is "*asleep*," **they don't get that Jesus means he is dead!** When Jesus suggests they travel to Bethany to "*wake him up*," the disciples question Jesus' judgment! After all, if Lazarus is sleeping, they figured that's a good sign that the worst of his illness has past and, besides, **doesn't Jesus realize the danger that awaits Him in Judea?** (John 11:8) Finally, Jesus resorts to plain speech. "*Lazarus is dead*," Jesus says. Ah, Thomas gets it! He gets that Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead will speed Jesus' own death. So, Thomas says, "*Let us also go, so that we may die with Him.*" (John 11:16 referring to Jesus, not Lazarus)

Just like the dry bones in the valley in Ezekiel, **Lazarus's situation seemed hopeless to the people in Bethany.** It appears to the family and friends of Lazarus that death had won. All that was left to do was grieve. Only one person besides Jesus held onto any hope, even if her hope was the future resurrection of the dead of all who believe in Jesus. 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.*" (John 11:21) I think it is important for us to remember that **Martha** was not just the busybody in the kitchen who was stressed that Mary wasn't helping her. She **was a woman of deep and profound faith.**

Jesus looked around at everyone weeping. He saw how hopeless they felt. And He loved His friend Lazarus. Twice in John's account we are told that Jesus was "*greatly disturbed*" in Spirit. Jesus sees their pain. He sees their hopelessness. He sees their need. And He enters into it, draws near and weeps with them.

When Jesus arrives at the grave of His friend Lazarus, **His own heart is truly broken because He openly weeps.** The grave is closed with a stone and that stone symbolizes the barrier that exists between the world of the living and that of the dead. Jesus said,

“Take away the stone.”(John 11:39) Martha, again, pleads with Jesus to be realistic for her brother had been dead for four days! The Jewish burial rite did not include embalming. The oil and spices used would have held unpleasant odors at bay for awhile, but after four days it would have been overpowering. The smell would be terrible!

But Jesus says, “*If you believe, you will see the glory of God.*”(John 11:40) In other words, **if Martha has faith in Jesus, she will be able to see clearly for herself that God, in fact, gives life to her brother.** So, Jesus says, “Take away the stone.” (John 11:40) **What Jesus wanted at this point was for all those present to see and believe that He had been sent by the Father, to bring new hope to the world.**

Instead, the stench of death here meets the fragrance of the resurrecting power of God’s Son. In a clear and powerful voice, Jesus simply cried out, “*Lazarus, come out!*”(John 11:43) Jesus wanted all those present to see, learn and understand that Lazarus was, in fact, alive! **What happened next is shocking to everyone to say the least!** Out of the dark, dusty, shadowy interior of the tomb Lazarus staggered out with his hands and feet bound in linen strips and his face wrapped in a cloth. He looked like he was dead but he was alive! A modern-day “Lazarus syndrome” case for sure!

Isn’t it interesting that these two portions of Scripture show up at this point during the season of Lent? They show up right when we might be weary from the journey of winter and the journey to the cross with Christ. These events can remind us of the hopelessness the followers of Jesus probably felt as the leaders turned against Jesus and arrested Him. But they also remind us that the cross is not the end of the story. They can remind us, **even in our own situations that feel hopeless, that God is not done with us. Hopelessness does not have the last word.**

This is a story of resurrection and Life! We can see ourselves in Lazarus and see the miracle of his restoration of physical life as the beginning of our entry into eternal life that begins the moment we embrace Jesus’ offer of a relationship with us. Being in a relationship with Jesus Christ means facing death and grief with Him and learning that still, in spite of the death and the dryness and the finality of the door at the entrance to the “tomb” of our hopes, **Jesus can still be said to be Life. Nothing is ever so dead that it keeps Jesus from being there for us. John points out in this account that Life in Christ is a future hope.**

Jesus responds to Lazarus’ illness by saying, “*...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.*” (John 11:4) This is also a reference to Jesus’ own resurrection which is to come.

God helps one who suffers from affliction. Lazarus is the “*one Jesus loves.*” (John 11:3) He represents ALL those whom Jesus loves, which includes you and me and all humankind. Lazarus reminds us that **we can experience a “coming to Life” in this present moment by placing our lives and faith and trust in the hands of Jesus Christ, our Lord.** We do not have to wait for a future event, like the resurrection of the dead when Jesus returns.

Death stinks. There’s no getting around it. But think about this: **We can’t experience resurrection until we experience death.** We can’t accept new life in Christ until we allow our old, sinful lives to end. **Lazarus is US,** bound by death in our current lives, the death of sin and rebellion against God. We are called to Life by Jesus, who is the Light and the Life of the world. Jesus stands at the edge of our tomb, shouting, “*Come out!*” **What do we need to let die, so that we can come out of our “tombs?”** What binds us to death, and prevents us from living abundantly, fully, as a new creation in Christ?

Whatever keeps us wrapped up in a dark cave of pride, hatred, lust, greed, deceit, or whatever stinks in our lives, **we need to hear the voice of Jesus calling to us, “Come out of there!” And then we must decide. Do we fall back into the tomb, or do we step out into the unknown?** What lies ahead is completely new territory. **But we don’t have to go there alone.** When Lazarus stepped out of that tomb, there were friends at hand to help him get out of his grave clothes, to support him and love him. Jesus provides us with families and friends and a community of faith, all to support us and show us His love. We can be there for each other. **We can substitute our own name for that of Lazarus, hear Christ’s command, and walk into the Light of His Love and Power, breaking free from the chains of sin that bind us.**

As we read through this account of Lazarus, we see that **Martha’s faith is placed right where ours often is, in what she thought would happen, not in who Jesus is.** In the daily grind of life, our world seems to be so barren of miracles that we think, “*Those days have gone. God can’t work now.*” **He DOES CONTINUE to work, though!** This is Martha’s faith – in the future, at the resurrection of the last day. She just forgot **that God was right there with her in that moment. Just as God is right here with us.**

This is what Jesus brings to her attention, and to ours. He shifts the focus back from the event to His Person, in the words, “*I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?*” (John 11:25) Jesus asked Martha, “**Do you believe this?**” Jesus is saying that **wherever He is, anything God ever did or could do can happen! There is always HOPE in Christ! Do WE believe this? Amen.**

