

Sermon: Believing Despite Understanding

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

5th Sunday of Lent

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

Today's first Scripture comes from Ezekiel 37:1-14. In this story, we see how the people of Israel were physically alive, but spiritually dead: they had turned away from God and had become like dry bones, without hope or life. Hear now, how God did not give up on them and breathed new life into the dry bones to restore the Israelites, once again as God's chosen people.

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. ² The Lord led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ God said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴ Then God said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ 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."

⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Then God said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, 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." ¹⁰ I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then God 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.' ¹² Therefore prophesy 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. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ 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." Amen.

John 11:1-45

Our second Scripture comes from the Gospel of John 11:1-45 and selected verses will be read. It is the story of the miraculous raising of Lazarus from the dead by Jesus. Let us hear the Word of the Lord, who reminds us that Jesus has power over death and how we are called to believe in eternal life through Christ.

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." 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.

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 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."

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

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Sermon: Believing Despite Understanding

Let us pray. Loving and Holy God, we humbly approach your throne, knowing that you give us new life each morning. As we marvel at your new mercies, may we be strengthened to trust and increase our faith in you despite our full understanding. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

This morning, we are asked the same question that Jesus asked Martha: do we believe in him, even when we don't fully understand his ways? Do we trust in his power and love, even in the midst of our pain and suffering? Believing despite understanding is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of strength and humility. It takes humility to acknowledge that we do not have all the answers, and that we need have faith in God's plan for our lives.

In today's readings from Ezekiel 37 and John 11, we see two powerful stories of faith and belief. We see that God is capable of bringing new life to seemingly hopeless situations, and that even in death, God has the power to bring resurrection and new beginnings.

Like Martha and Mary, I too struggle sometimes to understand why God allows certain things to happen to me, to us, and why our prayers sometimes seem to go unanswered. Our media does not help in this cause, as most headlines show the ugliness of humanity and sometimes unexplainable phenomenon that mother earth unleashes to the world. Yet, I have experienced the power of prayer that leads me to believe that God is with us and God hears our prayers. Like a child who may not fully understand everything that the parents are doing, we may not fully understand everything that God is doing in our lives, but we can still have faith and trust in that God has our best interest and intentions.

Believing despite understanding is not just a matter of intellectual assent: it is a matter of the heart. It is a deep-seated trust in God's character and God's promises. We may not fully understand how modern technology works, yet we still trust in it and use it every day. How many of us truly understand how your smartphone we carry works fully – how it carries our voices and internet data (which is another multiverse we do not fully comprehend) becomes available in the palm of our hands and we rely on it every day? Similarly, we may not fully understand God's plan for our lives, but we can still trust in God's wisdom and love.

The story of Lazarus reminds us that God has the power to bring new life, even in the midst of death. In the reading today, we can see that Martha and Mary struggled to understand why Jesus had not come earlier to heal their brother. They knew of the power Jesus had, yet couldn't understand why he delayed

two days in coming. Martha believed the resurrection on the final day but doubted the miracle that Jesus was about to do. In the midst of their confusion and grief, they still believed in Jesus' power and love.

When Jesus arrived at the tomb of Lazarus, he wept, showing us that Jesus understands our pain and our sorrow. Then, he commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb! To show us that even when all seems lost, it is God who has the power and authority to bring about resurrection and new beginnings. Just when we think there are obstacles and troubles that we cannot overcome, our Redeemer is also commanding us to come out of our tombs of doubt and fear by trusting in God's power and God's love.

Sometimes we feel like we are going through the motions of life, feeling as if we are cut off from the source of life, joy, and meaning. We may feel empty and hopeless, unable to find fulfillment in anything we do, like the dry bones that were covered in flesh yet without life. But just as God breathed new life into these dry bones in Ezekiel's vision, God can also breathe new life into us, transforming us to be like Ezekiel – a person who is empowered to the work of bringing hope, giving life, and a source of joy that comes from believing in Christ's love.

It is through our faith in Jesus that we experience the fullness of God's love and grace. Yes, believing despite understanding requires a certain level of surrendering of our need for control and our desire to understand everything; to acknowledge that we are human beings, a finite being, who are created in God's infinite wisdom whose will is beyond our comprehension. So how do we cultivate this kind of faith? How do we learn to believe despite understanding? It is through immersing ourselves in God's word, praying ceaselessly, and surrounding ourselves with the saints who are walking the same journey of faith.

First is the knowing the Bible, where the proof of God's steadfast love for us has been documented and exhibited through numerous stories of regular people's lives, just like you and me. These stories that tell us of God's faithfulness and God's willingness to bring about new path and life for the people whom God cares about. It allows us to peep into God's heart and give us an insight of who God is and how God continues to work through the Spirit in the world and in us.

Secondly, we must cultivate a spirit of prayer. Prayer is a way to communicate who we are to our living God – to express our doubts and fears as well as our hopes and dreams. Prayer accomplishes two things with one stone: it allows us to surrender our need for control while we ask God to increase our faith and trust in God's ways. As a reward, for those who have experienced the power of prayer, it is a personal revelation that God who got the whole world in God hands also tenderly cares and holds each of us in the same way.

Lastly, we are meant to be never alone. Not only does God walk with us every step we take, God has people appointed, anointed and surrounded us with people whom we will receive encouragement, support, and help so that we can run the great race of faith. Why do people in marathons and long bicycle races stay in a group for the majority of the race, even when they are competing against one another? It is because above and beyond the competition of winning, there is comradeship and same goal of finishing the race. They run together to keep pace with one another, sometimes pushing the other to keep up, so that they all can finish the race. Likewise, it is through sharing our struggles and fears with others in a community such as Westminster that we find strength and support to continue to believe despite understanding.

Therefore, in this season of Lent, let us continue deepening our faith, trusting in God's power and love to bring resurrection and new beginnings in our lives, even when we do not fully understand God's ways, knowing that our God will never forsake us and will forever choose to be our God regardless of our circumstances. Amen.