

Sermon – “All Rise”

Scripture Readings – Ezekiel 37:1-6, John 11:17-27, 33-44

Sunday, March 29, 2020

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, both scripture readings speak to the power of resurrection: God’s ability to bring life out of death and to breathe life into dire circumstances. In Ezekiel 37, the ancient Hebrew prophet brings words of hope to the exiled Israelites who find themselves in a foreign land. A new understanding of God is resurrected as well as their lives. Previously, they believed God was tied to the temple and the land; however, in this unexpected wilderness experience they discover the God who seeks them out wherever life finds them; the God who breathes life into their circumstances. Hear now God’s Holy Word in Ezekiel 37:1-6.

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and God 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 God 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, “Prophesy 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^[a] 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^[b] in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.” Amen.

Today we continue our Lenten journey toward Holy Week, which begins next Sunday. Our second scripture is John 11:17-27 and 33-44. We begin reading in the midst of the account of Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead. In telling the story, John is clearly setting the stage for Jesus’ own death and resurrection: the historical event, which proclaimed Jesus Christ as the life giving power of God. Listen now for God’s Holy Word.

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.” 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 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.” ... When Jesus saw Mary 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?” 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.” Then Jesus 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.” Amen.

The title of the sermon: "All Rise"

The text: "Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'" John 11:23

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for your life-giving breath which empowers each of us to rise time and time again. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Since we last gathered in this sanctuary to rise in reverence at the ringing of the Tower Bell, three saints within our faith community have met their Maker: Barb Dirksen, Betty Smith and Wilbur Wright. We remember their lives with joy and affection.

Barb rose to serve others through the generous gift of hospitality and warmth. She would often join the Marthas in our kitchen and the devoted disciples at Compass for Kids, our tutoring ministry for the at-risk children of Graham Elementary school. Betty rose to the occasion during our "Building a Legacy of Faith" Endowment Anniversary Campaign to help us meet our \$5 million goal in our effort to preserve the rich heritage of this church and to serve others in our neighborhood and throughout the world, both now and in perpetuity. When Dale Smith called this week to tell me his mother was in hospice, the word of Wilbur's death had just been relayed. Dale and Wilbur would often share a pew on Sunday mornings.

At the age of 105, Wilbur Wright was Westminster's oldest member and our patriarch. Born in 1914 at the height of the Wright brothers' fame, Wilbur was named for the man whose intelligence, discipline, curiosity, and persistence made it possible for each of us to rise in the gift of flight and aviation. In many ways, Wilbur exemplified the characteristics of his namesake in the intelligent, curious, creative, and resilient life he lived.

It is difficult to imagine how many days in his 105 years Wilbur would rise from his bed to greet the sun, to meet the challenge before him, and to read the newspaper or how many Sundays Wilbur would rise from his pew to be called to worship, to sing hymns, and to affirm his faith. One can only imagine how many circumstances of loss, defeat, and disappointment from which Wilbur would rise to meet the occasion with courage and renewed strength or how many unanswered questions from which Wilbur would rise to keep on asking, reading, and wondering.

Yes, Wilbur died during the COVID-19 pandemic which has risen unexpectedly, to date taking over 20,000 lives, disrupting our routines and economy and giving rise to anxiety and fear for our well-being and the well-being of those we love. As my husband Peter observed, Wilbur was four years old when the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic took the lives of 50 million people. Born six years after the raising of this sanctuary, Wilbur lived through a century of two world wars, the Great Depression, and half a dozen world pandemics.

Fortunately, during Wilbur's century God revealed to us life-renewing public health initiatives so that clean water, indoor plumbing, improved hygiene, and less crowded living could lead us to longer, healthier, and more fulfilling lives. Through the miracles of public health and modern medicine as well as good genes and faithful discipline, Wilbur lived more than twice the age anticipated for a baby boy born in 1914. Amongst a new and frightening pandemic, now again we must rise to follow God-given and life-renewing measures that separate us in this season to refrain from embracing.

As Jesus wept with Mary and Martha in the death of their brother Lazarus, we weep with those around the world who have lost loved ones. As God breathed life into the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel, courageous men and women are caring for those whose breathing is compromised because of this virus. Scientists are rising and working around the clock to discover both a vaccine and a treatment. Economists and government servants are rising to breathe life into our markets and provide assistance to our most vulnerable. Friends within Westminster, the Springfield community and beyond are rising to care for one another in life-giving ways.

We may not be rising from the pews within this sanctuary on Easter morning; however, we will all rise wherever we find ourselves to affirm the Risen God. We will rejoice together in the God who greets us each morning and who hears us when we cry out of the depths, the God who is not only the author of life giving us our first breath, but the God who has the power to bring life out of death, light out of darkness, new beginnings out of endings, gain out of loss, and growth out of times of dormancy.

Jesus did not raise Lazarus from the dead so Mary and Martha would not have to experience the pain of death, but rather as a sign to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed sent by God and had the power to give life. The story of the raising of Lazarus reveals the God who meets us in our time of loss and foreshadows Christ's own death and resurrection. As one reads this story one is taken by the many similarities and parallel phrases between this resurrection and Christ's own. So much here is reminiscent of Gethsemane, Golgotha and Easter:

Jesus is deeply moved and troubled. Jesus weeps. The tomb is near Jerusalem; the tomb is a cave with a huge stone covering it, the stone is rolled away. Jesus cries with a loud voice, the grave clothes are removed from the one who was dead but is now alive. As theologian Fred Craddock points out, "One can hardly read the account and continue to think of Lazarus, one thinks of Jesus."

My friends, think of Jesus often during these days and find strength in the God who walks with us through the dark valley, the God who breathes life into our dry bones so that in the midst of pain we can choose love, and in the midst of war, we can choose peace. When our world falls down and explanations can't be found, may we climb to holy ground and may we all rise. Thanks be to God. Amen.