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April 2, 2017

"Hope"

Ezekiel 37:1-14 John 11:1-45 Romans 8:6-11

PRAYER OF PRAISE:

God of life, present and promised, you are the One to whom we call: for you are the One who hears, and you are the One who acts, bringing us new life with your grace and love and power. Lead us in our time of worship, that we may be prepared to follow your lead in places where life is at risk—places where hope seems far away, places where dreams die during sleep. When we leave these walls, help us live the teachings we proclaim within this place of worship, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO EZEKIEL 37:1-14

The Prophet Ezekiel had been called to prophesy to the children of Israel when they were in exile. She was "dead" as a nation, deprived of her land, her king, and her temple. She had been divided and dispersed for so long that unification and restoration seemed impossible. So God gave Ezekiel the vision of the dry bones as sign of hope.

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 11:1-45

These last few Sundays we've been looking at a series of encounters that people had with Jesus. We've seen a religious leader named Nicodemus who was afraid to be seen in broad daylight who comes to Jesus at night. We've seen a woman who was a social outcast and afraid to be seen with anyone who went to the well when at high noon when no one else would so she wouldn't be seen. We've seen a man who couldn't see to whom Jesus reached out. This morning we look at a person who couldn't see, speak or hear because he had been dead for four days. Hear now the gospel of our Lord from John 11, verses 1-47.

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I noticed that this week the Little League season has begun. I heard about a man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing we're behind."

"Boy," said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged."

"Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!" Now THAT's hope!

Eugene Land, who was a self-made millionaire, greatly changed the lives of a sixth-grade class in East Harlem. Mr. Land had been asked to speak to a class of 59 sixth-graders. What could he say to inspire these students, most of whom would drop out of school? He wondered how he could get these predominantly black and Puerto Rican children even to look at him. Scrapping his notes, he

decided to speak to them from his heart. "Stay in school," he admonished, "and I'll help pay the college tuition for every one of you." At that moment the lives of these students changed. For the first time they had hope. One student said, "I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling." Nearly 90 percent of that class went on to graduate from high school. They had hope.

Ezekiel had a vision that a valley of dried up bones and was told to prophesy to those dried up bones. In that vision God was telling Ezekiel that anything was possible. Even Israel could make a comeback. They could comeback to life and comeback from exile. There was hope.

When Jesus' mother Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she was to have a child she questioned how it could be since she had never been with a man. The angel responded, "With God all things are possible." There was hope.

With God all things are possible. With us humans, some things are possible.

With the advent of crash carts and paddles and someone yelling, "Clear!" we regularly see the art of resuscitation dramatized on TV. We watch as the actor playing a doctor on TV tries once, twice, maybe even three times, each time increasing the wattage. If their efforts are successful, the camera swings to the monitor and the flat line jumps and starts making mountains and hills.

I once heard a program that interviewed physicians about using the paddles to resuscitate patients. When they were asked if they would want them used on them 96% said no. When asked why, they reported that the paddles only work about 6% of the time. When asked why they were used so much, they said, "TV". On TV the paddles work almost every time. That's good drama. It's not reality.

With us, resuscitation is possible, but for it to be successful it has to take place within seconds or maybe minutes at the most of a person dying. However, I have yet to see a team and a crash cart rush into a morgue 4 days after someone has died and hooking up to the wall plug and yelling "Clear!"

Lazarus' tomb was a cave with a stone lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha replied, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days." I think the King James Version says, "He stinketh."

Jesus told her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they removed the stone. Then Jesus looked upward and said a prayer. Then he cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus came forth from the tomb, like a mummy from a B horror film he came forth doing the "mummy hop" because he was bound head and foot with strips of cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

The obvious message of this story, of course, is Jesus' power over death. That's why when he was talking with Martha he didn't say, I Am the Resuscitation. He said, "I AM the Resurrection."

Lazarus was resuscitated. On another day, Lazarus would die again and stay that way. Lazarus is the only person to have a funeral mulligan!

Because of Jesus, all who believe in him have something far better than resuscitation. They have the promise of resurrection. They have HOPE.

Clare Boothe Luce once said, "There are no hopeless situations; there are only people who have grown hopeless about them."

At the university there was a piano teacher that was simply and affectionately known as "Herman." One night at a university concert, a distinguished piano player suddenly became ill while performing an extremely difficult piece. No sooner had the artist retired from the stage when Herman rose from his seat in the audience, walked on stage, sat down at the piano and with great mastery completed the performance. Later that evening, at a party, one of the students asked Herman how he was able to perform such a demanding piece so beautifully without notice and with no rehearsal. He replied,

"In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak. But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might someday play again, I needed to practice every day. I began by fingering a piece from my repertoire on my bare board bed late one night. The next night I added a second piece and soon I was running through my entire repertoire. I did this every night for five years. It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was part of that repertoire. That constant practice is what kept my hope alive. Every day I renewed my hope that I would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano, and in freedom." 2

When we say the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed to affirm our faith we say that we believe in the resurrection of the dead. What does that mean exactly? It means that we believe that when we die our spirits go to be with the Lord in a place prepared for us by Jesus. Jesus said to one of the thieves who were crucified beside him "Today you will be in Paradise with me."

When we say we believe in the resurrection of the dead we are saying that we believe that there will come a time when our spirits will be embodied in a resurrection body like Jesus had. Jesus' resurrection body was one that could pass through walls and yet it was a physical body that could be touched. To prove that he was not a ghost or an apparition or a figment of their imagination the resurrected Jesus asked for something to eat and actually ate a piece of fish.

Jesus said, "I Am the Resurrection and the Life." Those who believe in me EVEN THOUGH, EVEN WHEN, they die they will continue to live in spirit and one day, one day even live in a spiritual body like Jesus had. That is our HOPE!

The story of the raising of Lazarus is a living lesson about our hope. To those who believe, Christ has given this promise: when this world has passed away, we shall live with him forever. Just as Christ wept over Lazarus and resuscitated him from the dead, so Jesus has compassion over our situation, whatever it may be.

Senator John McCain spent 5 and half years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam in the 1960s. During that time, he was frequently tortured or held in solitary confinement. He reports that his lowest point came on Christmas Eve 1969. McCain was giving up hope of ever getting out of Vietnam alive. To compound his homesickness, the captors played the song "I'll Be Home for Christmas" over the PA system.

Just then, McCain heard tapping on his cell wall. This was the communication code the POWs used to communicate with one another. On the other side of the wall was Ernie Bruce, a Marine who had been imprisoned for four years already. In spite of his dire situation, Bruce was tapping out, "We'll all be home for Christmas. God bless America." These simple words of comfort restored John McCain's hope. 1

For 6 years those 6<sup>th</sup> grade students stayed in school because they had hope of going to college. For five years a pianist practiced concert pieces on a board with no sound in hope that he would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano, and in freedom." For 5 and a half years John McCain held out hope that he would be released. There was hope.

What is your hope? There are hopes for things in this life, like being going to college or being freed from prison or playing on a real piano in freedom. But there is a hope that Barry Vickers, and Nona Rushing and Clyde Casey and Tad Patton and Peter Bradley and Pam Pate and Wendy Bailey are now experiencing that is far greater than any earthly hope.

Jesus wept by an occupied tomb and called his friend to come forth. Days later, Mary wept by an unoccupied tomb until she realized that Jesus had also ... come forth.

Unlike Lazarus, Jesus never died again. From that day on Jesus has lived and lives and because he lives we know that even when we die, our spirits will live on. Because He lives, one day...one day what Christians have recited for centuries that they believe will become a reality. One day... for all who believe ...there will be a resurrection of the body and our spirits will be united with those bodies ...because of the One who stood by the grave of his friend Lazarus and

All these things, Lord, grant us according to Your gracious will, keeping from us all things harmful and giving to us only those things which are good and profitable to us and our salvation until that day when we shall see You face to face and rejoice with Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Ezekiel and all the saints in Your presence forevermore

1. David E. Leininger, ChristianGlobe Network, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations,
2. Source Unknown Christiangularbe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations,