

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-15

The story, described by John, is easy enough to relate to. Brother Lazarus is ill; seriously ill. We hear that all the time; we go through it time and time again. Someone in our family, or in our extended family circle, our church circle, is in rough shape. Often the Lord seems distant, even absent.

The two sisters, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus (like we send prayer word to Jesus). They offer no spoken petition, no specific request for a cure. They simply state the pain-laden obvious: "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." Nothing in the story, so far, is out of the ordinary; we've all been there. But we inch a little closer; we prepare to watch and hear the Savior's response. Will it align with what we would do, if we were Jesus? Sickness plus love of the Savior – got any ideas? Knowing the one usual, constant, spoken or unspoken request: please, Lord, not death!

Who could predict the next turn? "When Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was." After two days pass, Jesus decides to go. By the time he gets there, Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days. Needless to say, that stinks; figuratively and literally. Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen. Illness plus love for Lazarus and his sisters by an absent Savior equaled death. "Lazarus has died," Jesus tells the disciples before he gets up and moves from the distant Point A, "For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him." When he gets there, as we know, Jesus wept. But here, before heading out that way, Jesus uses an unexpected, startling feeling word: glad, related to his friend's dying. "I'm glad, because now you can believe." As if belief is what is at stake, much more so than life or death. To believe is the whole purpose; it's bigger than life and death.

Life and death get played out, at the valley of dry bones, with the prophet Ezekiel and the Lord, with the same underlying intention: know the Lord. The scene is likely the aftermath of a vast military defeat. Someone, some ones, wanted these people dead, and they succeeded. We can think Viet Nam, Normandy, think Hiroshima, Pearl Harbor, 9/11, Wounded Knee. It doesn't take much, it's not too far of a stretch, to recall the aftermath of vast human tragedies. How could this happen? Where is the Lord? Is God delayed, by a few days, or longer? They are dry bones, out in the air, unburied, making them cursed at that time: rejected, detested, unredeemable. The unmarked open grave; they are nameless, abandoned, forgotten. Our ears perk up, we inch closer to hear Ezekiel and the Lord at death's victory valley. The Lord asks the prophet, "Human one, can **these** bones live again?" Ezekiel replies, "Lord God, only you know." I hear faith: Ezekiel had no idea - only you know, Lord, if **these** bones can come back to life.

Last Sunday morning, thirteen of us from Holy Way, at about this time, were visiting CREDDA, the alcohol and drug rehab center in Agua Prieta. Our host was Ernesto, a resident, who spoke Spanish. His translator, also a resident, spoke in quick, low tones, so we didn't always catch, clearly, the words Ernesto spoke. He told us about his life

before rehab, not an uncommon tale, of drug use, heroin addiction, rejection by his family, stealing, barely surviving, severe depression, wanting to die. He showed us a photo of when he came to CREDDA four years ago, weighing 97 lbs.; now he weighs 200 and looks ten years younger. We toured the facility and stopped inside their kitchen. Ernesto spoke words to us, not unlike the words heard by those unnamed, unworthy bones in the valley, or heard by a dead man in the tomb. Not nameless, nor abandoned; not forgotten. Ernesto, speaking from the heart, his moist eyes confirming their meaning, told us, "Only God can bring you life. Without God, there is nothing. Fui de la puerta de la muerte a la puerta de la vida. (I went from the door of death to the door of life.)" Amidst these dry bones, in a land where honest workers barely earn enough to eke out a minimal living, where the threats of drugs and violence dominate, where the border divide troubles and wounds, where life and death problems crush and overwhelm, God speaks people back to life.

"Dry bones, hear the Lord's word! When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord." Belief is at stake here; only God brings life.

We are baptized into the promised victory of life over death; all are worthy, redeemable. Our bones rattle and quake with animation as God utters the word; our lungs breath in and breath out by the gift of the Holy Spirit. We come to the table, recalling that the one who raised Lazarus would also be dead and buried in a tomb on Friday after the Thursday meal with his disciples. We are alive by faith in the risen Lord. We receive again the bread of life and the cup of salvation. We've all gone from the door of death to the door of life. We live for Jesus Christ – all thanks be to God.