

Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

Who Could Stand?

Our call to worship this morning, from Psalm 130, asks a great question. “If You should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” (Psalm 130:3). Or, in other words, “If He kept a record of sins, who could stand?” If God kept a record of all the wrongs we did, and held everything against us we would be hopeless. In fact, that’s exactly what we were – before Jesus! Without Him, no one could stand.

The Psalmist recognized it. “But with You is forgiveness.” Jesus washes us clean! That’s great news! On Wednesday nights the adults have been talking about a book written by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. In his book, he discusses the idea of sanctification – being made pure and holy – or as he calls it, Christian perfection.

This is the message Wesley writes about, in a nutshell. That with Jesus we have the beautiful possibilities of hope, life, and forgiveness. It’s the same message the Church, in general, has carried down through the ages. Jesus gives us His life in exchange for ours, and in so doing, pours out the full blessing upon us, of restored relationships with God and fellow human beings.

When we start to gather people together, we begin to have a community. That’s the gist of Ezekiel’s message we heard this morning – that God would breathe new life into a dead community. He breathes life into old, dead things. I love that old story about the valley of dry bones. The first time I heard it was during a Vacation Bible School back in the 1980’s at the Port Jefferson United Methodist Church. In my mind’s eye, I can still see Martha Ely and some of those other ladies from Port Jefferson dancing around, singing “Them Bones, Them Bones, Them Dry Bones.” It was one of the weirdest songs I’d ever heard – but sure was a lot of fun!

Today’s Gospel reading, from the eleventh chapter of John, is about life, and Jesus being the Lord of Life. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to John 11:1-45. **Read John 11:1-45.**

Lazarus, Martha, and Mary

The story of Jesus raising Lazarus is a pretty familiar one. Most people who grow up in churches hear it before they ever reach adulthood. In doing only what He alone can do – raising the dead to life – Jesus proves He’s the Lord of Life. “Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped His feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one You love is sick,’” (Jn. 11:1-3).

I want to point something out here, just to help connect the dots. Mary, Lazarus' sister, apparently at one point led quite the lifestyle, and not in a good way. Besides this reference to her by John, she also shows up in the Gospel accounts recorded by Mark and Luke. Luke's recollection of her is pretty unflattering. "When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume and as she stood behind Him at His feet weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this Man were a prophet, He would know who is touching Him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner,'" (Luke 7:37-39).

We aren't told what sort of sin Mary committed, that caused the Pharisee to look negatively upon her. From what we can tell she was never married, and had enough money to buy an expensive jar of perfume, which Mark indicates could have been sold for more than a year's wages (14:3). I'll let you come to your own conclusion as to how she managed to have that kind of money in a male dominated society.

Her brother, Lazarus, is sick, so her and her sister, Martha, send word to Jesus. "When He heard this, Jesus said, 'This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it,'" (Jn. 11:4). John also records that "when He heard Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days, and then He said to His disciples, 'Let's go back to Judea,'" (verses 6-7). Of course, the disciples – those closest to Jesus – they know He's in danger with the Pharisees and Sadducees. They know those guys are out to get Him. "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone You, and yet You're going back?" (verse 8).

Jesus' Disciples are in Protection Mode

Jesus' friends want to keep Him safe – they want to protect Him. The disciples are in protection mode. They didn't understand His mission. Even up to Holy Thursday, they were willing to do what they could to protect Jesus. On that night, in the garden, Peter drew his sword and cut the ear off the chief priest's guard. Remember that story? And Jesus told Peter to put his sword away, and healed the guard's ear (Luke 22:51).

In our Scripture this morning, Jesus tells the disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up," (Jn. 11:11). To which the disciples reply, "If he sleeps, he will get better," (verse 12). Since becoming your pastor going on three years July 1, I've had the opportunity to spend some time with your families as you go through the same process Mary and Martha went through with their brother, Lazarus. Specifically, I think about Keith, Delbert, Janet, Becky, and Shirley. In the weeks and days leading up to each of those saints' being called home by Jesus, each of them got to a point where they were sleeping, not responding much – and when I'd stop by, I'd encourage the family to just let them rest.

We knew they were dying, but in the act of sleeping, while this body is winding down and wearing out – sleep is a blessing because they’re relieved from pain, at least temporarily. So, friends, just for future reference, if it ever comes up – when they’re asleep, I never wake them up. Don’t wake them up on my account. I’ll hold their hand, and whisper a prayer with them, but let them rest, because it’s a temporary relief, until God gives the final relief and calls them home.

Now we’re told by John that “Jesus had been speaking of Lazarus’ death, but His disciples thought He meant natural sleep. So then He told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him,’” (verses 13-15). Of course, we also see an interjection there, from Thomas the apostle – most famously known by his nickname, “Doubting Thomas.” “Then Thomas (also known as Didymus, or the Twin) said to the rest of the disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with Him,’” (verse 16). See, the disciples are still in protection mode.

Lazarus is Dead

The next thing we hear is that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. In those days, they didn’t do much with regards to embalming. They may have put oils on the body, and covered it in a linen shroud, but that was about it. They let nature take its course, so to speak. You know, we also need to consider the climate. Temperature-wise that area stays between about 50° and 77°F all year. Sounds like my kind of place!

Apparently Lazarus was well-known. We’re told that a lot of Jews had come out to comfort the sisters on the loss of their brother. Martha, the older sister, hears that Jesus was coming, so she goes out to meet Him, while Mary stays back at the house (paraphrased verses 19-20). Notice what Martha says to Jesus – because Mary repeats it later, so they must have sat and talked about this with each other over the last four days. “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died,” (verses 21, 32).

Martha and Jesus have a conversation, suggesting that Martha knows her brother Lazarus will rise again “at the last day,” (verse 24). While one of the often quoted statements made by Jesus comes next, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” (verses 25-26). Here we have the mystery of our faith. Whoever believes in Jesus lives, even though this body wears out and dies. Do you believe this, New Hope?

If we don’t have this belief – this faith – nothing else matters. If we don’t know Jesus Christ, it won’t matter how big of a bank account you’ve got. It’s not going to matter how many great and good things you’ve done. None of that’s going to count for

anything. It all boils down, as the old song says, to “Sinners, do you love my Jesus? If You love Him, why not serve Him?” and “If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but don’t have love” – don’t have Jesus – “I’m only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal,” (1 Cor. 13:1).

Martha – a Woman of Faith

We have to have faith in Jesus Christ! And Martha did. She says, “I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world,” (Jn. 11:27). See friends, Martha’s a woman of faith. Now she gets picked on because everyone remembers the story about her busying herself in the kitchen, while her sister, Mary, sat at Jesus’ feet. But Martha had it. We might say she was one of the original United Women in Faith, formerly known as United Methodist Women. All joking aside, we need to get you ladies more involved in things like United Women in Faith. They do great things. Here in Ohio, United Methodist Women, as they were known before the 2022 rebrand, was one of the leading advocacy groups to help get the word out on human trafficking.

There are materials out on the Ohio Department of Education website regarding human trafficking, and ODE got their information from the West Ohio United Methodist Women. Human trafficking’s a real problem. We are not immune to it. Everybody sticks their head in the sand and thinks, “That stuff doesn’t happen here.” Well, I-75 runs right through the heart of Shelby County, and it’s one of the biggest human trafficking routes in the nation. I’d love to see you New Hope ladies actively involved – godly women warriors fighting for the Lord against the sin of human trafficking – making this part of the world a safe harbor for the least and the lost. I’d also like to see you all getting together for some fellowship with each other – like the men of the church do. Kendra makes food for that – I’d be happy to make food for you ladies. Pick a Saturday, and let’s make it happen.

In our Gospel lesson today, Mary is apparently oblivious of Jesus’ arrival to the outskirts of their community. After her declaration of faith, Martha has to go get Mary. And when Mary leaves her house, all the people go along with her, because they think she’s going out to Lazarus’ tomb to mourn (verses 28-31, paraphrased). Pay attention to what Mary says when she first sees Jesus – it’s the same thing Martha said when she saw Him. “When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet and said, ‘Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died,’” (verse 32). These sisters had seen Jesus heal people of all sorts of illnesses before. They knew He could have made Lazarus well, if only He would have been there.

We’re told that “when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled,” (verse 33). The weeping Mary and the other Jews are doing is not the usual experience we have. We hear the term “weeping,” and think they’re shedding tears silently. That’s not what

the original language indicates at all here. These people were wailing. They were moaning. Inconsolable crying. It's loud and noisy. Seeing the intense grief, hearing all the loud and agonizing groaning – it's no wonder that the Author of Compassion was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. When Jesus – God – sees us in grief, He grieves with us.

He Grieves with Us

So He asks where they've buried Lazarus, and they show Him. And then we get to the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept," (verse 35). Not the "weeping" of Mary, Martha, and the Jews – the weeping of Jesus is calm, quiet, peaceful. It's our usual "shedding tears" type of weeping. I read this, and I wonder, who is it for? For whom does Jesus weep? I'll come back to this thought in a moment. The weeping Jesus gets a reaction from the Jews who were there that day – "See how He loved him!" they say (verse 36), while others seem to have the same mindset as Mary and Martha, "if only Jesus had been there at the right time, He could have healed him."

Then the really remarkable thing happens. Jesus tells them to roll the stone away from Lazarus' tomb. Martha objects, "Lord, there's a bad odor by now – he's been dead for four days," (verse 39). Going back to the idea of the climate, think about things around here during the months of May and early June. We see a lot of road kill. You'll see raccoons, opossums, and other stuff along the side of the road, and after about a day, they start getting pretty puffy. So even though Lazarus is inside the tomb, his body's already started to decay.

Back in 2009, my great aunt, Jean Bell, passed away. On the day of her funeral, her only daughter slipped and fell as she was leaving her home. Needless to say, Sue called Mark Adams, and postponed the funeral for a month. By the time the funeral happened, everything had changed to closed casket service. When we got to the graveside at Shelby Memorial Gardens, and everyone else except immediate family was gone, Sue asked Mark to open the casket. The look on his face was priceless. I don't think he'd ever had someone ask for that before. He opened it up – she was in there – but it wasn't the prettiest I'd seen her.

Lazarus, Come Out!

When Jesus told them to roll the stone away, they listened to Him. And then He prayed. "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent Me," (verses 41-42). And then "Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face," (verses 43-44). The act of raising Lazarus from the dead caused many Jews who were there to believe in Jesus that day.

I want to briefly go back to this idea about Jesus weeping. I wonder, when Jesus wept, did He weep from a place of compassion for all the grief He saw and heard in the faces and cries of Mary, Martha, and the others there that day? I'm sure He did. When He wept, did He weep for Lazarus? What I mean is, did Jesus experience sorrow over knowing He would be calling Lazarus back from Abraham's bosom? Calling Lazarus back from the place of peaceful rest – what we call heaven or paradise today – to call Lazarus back into this life with all its suffering and woes?

You know, after Lazarus walked out of the tomb alive again, he also became a target for the chief priests. We don't often hear about that. John records, "The chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in Him," (12:10-11). I'm certain Jesus knew this would happen. Do you suppose that caused Him grief? I suspect so. When Jesus wept, do you think, possibly, He wept because He also knew that we would also experience all the grief we experience in our lifetimes?

Our God puts on human skin – Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-Is-With-Us – He's living, breathing compassion and mercy. It surely breaks His heart each time He sees us suffering, experiencing sorrow, and treating other people like objects to be tossed away like a McDonald's hamburger wrapper. Without Jesus, who could stand? No one could. And yet, despite our wrestling within our human natures and tendency to mess stuff up, He loves us anyways. He breathes new life into these dead, dry bones through His own in-dwelling Holy Spirit. He gives us new hope, and a purpose. His greatest work, done on the cross, and completed at the empty tomb on Resurrection Sunday is the restoration and reconciliation of us to Himself, and to others. But we have to be willing to let Him be Lord, to let His Spirit inside us change and transform us, and to make us His faithful followers.

Prayer: God of all consolation and compassion, Your Son comforted the grieving sisters, Martha and Mary; Your breath alone brings life to dry bones and weary souls. Pour out Your Spirit upon us, that we may face despair and death with the hope of resurrection and faith in the One who called Lazarus forth from the grave. Amen.