

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: March 26, 2023, Yr. A, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Text: John 11:1-45

Title: Can These Bones Live? (Sanctified Art)

Focus: In whom or in what do we place our trust in times of despair and where do we find hope? Jesus, fully human and fully God, is with us.

### **Gospel Reading: John 11:1-45**

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ <sup>4</sup>But when Jesus heard it, he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’ <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

<sup>7</sup> Then after this he said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’ <sup>8</sup>The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’ <sup>9</sup>Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. <sup>10</sup>But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’ <sup>11</sup>After saying this, he told them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.’ <sup>12</sup>The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.’ <sup>13</sup>Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup>For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’ <sup>16</sup>Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’

<sup>17</sup> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ <sup>27</sup>She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’

<sup>28</sup> 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.’ <sup>29</sup>And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they

thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup>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.' <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>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 for four days.' <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>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.' <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' <sup>44</sup>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.'

## The Weight of Grief

- **"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."**

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to greet him and this is what she said to him.

**Quick overview of the story:** Martha and Mary are sisters. Lazarus is their brother. They are all friends with Jesus. They sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick, then he died. They live in Bethany, which is just 2 miles from Jerusalem.

- "If you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Mary, who stayed in Bethany while Martha went out to greet Jesus, later found him, still in the same place where Martha had met him (v. 32). She said the same thing.

Wow! I can't imagine a more stark and honest expression than that. Isn't that a multi-faceted statement:

- It is a **painful expression of deep loss**; it acknowledges the pain of death and of missing one's brother. You hear the longing and the pain of what they have said--both Martha and Mary.
- There may also be **disappointment, anger, and a tone of blame** in there: "If you had been here. . .," but, of course, you were not.
- And it is also an **affirmation of trust and hope**: "You can do things that no one else can do. In you I find meaning and hope and new life."
- **"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."**

Do you have ideas about what is okay to express to God and what is not? Is it “okay” to be angry with God? Or disappointed? Is it okay to express that? Is it okay to cry out to God in anguish or despair? Maybe you hold back. Maybe you don’t express such things. Maybe that doesn’t feel right. I can understand such hesitancy. But this passage suggests to me that God is plenty big enough to hear your anger, disappointment, fear, anxiety, and deep loss.

### **What do you notice about what Jesus does when first Martha and then Mary say this to him?**

- “Hey, Martha, I got here as quickly as I could. . .”
  - As though he’s making an excuse—that he wanted to be there, but he got held up by unexpected traffic.
  - No, he doesn’t dodge or explain or make an excuse.
- “Martha, you know they’re trying to harm me in Jerusalem; I’m taking a real risk by coming here to Bethany.” (Just 2 miles away—all in the region of Judea).
  - No, he doesn’t lay some trip on her, reminding her of how much he’s extending himself or what risk he facing. It’s not about him. He’s listening to Martha and to Mary.
- “Hey, Martha, don’t dump your load on me!”
  - No, he doesn’t react defensively.

I think first he listens. Then (to Martha), he promises Lazarus will rise again. Martha hears this as ‘Lazarus will rise on the day of resurrection.’

Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. . .” and she trusts him as Messiah.

When Mary comes, she too says, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” This is the same as Martha expressed before—there is longing, anguish, grief, blame, hope all caught up in such an expression. Mary says this to Jesus, too. What happens then?

### **Jesus, Fully Divine, Fully Human**

Do you remember what Jesus said to the disciples when he first received word from Martha and Mary that their brother, Jesus’ own friend, “the one whom you love,” is ill? Jesus heard the message that Lazarus was ill and yet he told the disciples that this event was somehow going to be for God’s glory, “that the Son of Man may be glorified through it” (v. 4).

Since the 4<sup>th</sup> century (381) and what’s called the Second Ecumenical Council, which was convened in Constantinople, which is now Istanbul, Turkey, the Christian Church has affirmed that Jesus is **“fully human and fully divine”** (or at least the orthodox view was established.) The ecumenical council was called as a means of seeking clarity and unity as a Church.

It's not like these doctrines or understanding of who Jesus is (The Big Church Word is *Christology*) are fully spelled out in Scripture, as though the Bible is a textbook and you just have to turn to the right chapter to read all about it. So, the Ecumenical Councils helped identify and clarify their understanding of Jesus (The Church's understanding).

While we affirm “fully human and fully divine” by faith, it's not something that we can easily explain. But this is a passage in which both Jesus' divine nature and human nature seem to be at play.

When he tells the disciples that this event is going to be for God's glory and so that the Son of God may be glorified in it, I hear that as an indicator of the **divine nature** in Jesus. He knew that this event would be for God's glory. God had a plan and Jesus was a part of that plan. Jesus in some way knew what was going to happen.

### **The Hope Expressed in “Can these Bones Live?”**

“**Can these bones live?**” is the focus question from the folks at *A Sanctified Art*. The phrase is drawn from the first reading for the day, Ezekiel, in which Ezekiel sees a vision of dry bones on the desert, wondering if they can come to life. Sometimes I think that passage is pretty odd—pretty funky. It sounds too much like a cartoon—not real life. Or it sounds like a weird Halloween movie or image with dancing skeletons or something.

When I am thinking more creatively, I think what the image of dry bones suggests is the yearning for hope.

- “Do we dare to have hope in desperate times?”
- “Where do we place our hope or in whom shall we place our hope?”
- “What can we expect when we experience despair and loss, and we wonder if we can keep putting one foot in front of the other?”
- When the health challenges just keep on coming, where do we turn?
- When we are worn out as a caregiver, where is hope?
- When daily life and its responsibilities seem to be too much—parenting, caring for one's aging parents, living as an engaged citizen in a divided society. . . , where do we go with those burdens?
- Here's how Pastor Danielle expresses these kinds of daily pressures in the reflection in the *Sanctified Art* devotional booklet:
  - “We're facing a world of climate emergency, war, a growing immigration crisis, a terrifying surge in hate groups, rising global fascism, technological overload, and, in case we forget, an ongoing pandemic. If fear were an energy source, we could all power our homes and cars for a year.”
- Our Call to Worship this morning asked, “Have you ever felt washed up, brittle, worn-down to the bone?”

**Where is hope or where is energy, creativity, and new life?** I think that's the focus of the image of the dry bones in the desert and that's the yearning cry of Martha and Mary who, in their grief, call out to Jesus, **"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."**

**I think it's when Mary says this to Jesus that we see the "fully human" nature of Jesus—the counterpart to the fully divine nature.**

- When he saw her weeping, and those around her also weeping, he was "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (v. 33).
- Greatly disturbed again, he came to the tomb (v. 34).

People may talk about and even, I suppose, to some degree, debate what's happening in this passage in John and what the sign or miracle is here.

- Is the raising of Lazarus the sign or the miracle that is the most amazing thing here or
- Is the most amazing thing here a loving God who is fully human in Jesus who chooses to assume human vulnerability and who experiences pain and loss and weeps with those who weep?

God in Jesus is willing to walk alongside us no matter what we face.

No matter what we face in life, whatever hardship we experience, God in Jesus has known that pain.

- I think Jesus wept because he sees the pain of Martha and Mary.
- I think Jesus wept because he, the fully human Jesus, experiences the loss of his own friend Lazarus, the one whom he loved (v. 3). He wept, even when he as fully divine knew that this event would be for God's glory.
- I think Jesus wept because he was considering that his own suffering and death were right around the corner. He was nearing Jerusalem.

To me, it is a wondrous sign that Jesus, by divine power raised Lazarus from the dead. And it is also a wondrous sign that Jesus was so fully human that he accompanies us in all our human vulnerabilities and that he wept.

## **The Place of Hope**

So, "Can these Bones Live?" Where is hope?

What would it mean to know that God in Jesus accompanies you no matter what you face? What would it mean to you that there is nothing that you have experienced that Jesus himself has not endured in some way?

I recently hear the story of Laura, who reflected on the time when she was a 37-year-old mother of two young children undergoing chemotherapy for stage 4 breast cancer. In her own way, she was asking, “Can these bones live? Where is hope?”

Here’s her story, as she herself tells it:

*“My Unsung Hero” tells the stories of people whose kindness left a lasting impression on someone else. Today’s story comes from Laura Holmes Haddad. One day, she went for an X-ray at a large hospital in San Francisco. The following is the transcript from the first-person audio to be played in worship:*

**LAURA HOLMES HADDAD:** I got X-rays and scans constantly, so it was nothing new to me. But I was getting used to the anonymous feeling of being a patient, just a medical record number shivering in a white-and-blue hospital gown and scratchy blue hospital socks. And I was completely bald. I was still adjusting to life without hair and feeling very self-conscious. And I didn’t wear a wig, but I wouldn’t go outside my house without my headscarf. But in the X-ray room, I had to take off my scarf, and I was so upset and distraught about being bald in front of a stranger. But the X-ray tech, a man, was bald also, which made me feel a little bit better. He was average height, wearing scrubs, and he had very kind, blue eyes. And he was very gentle with me as he helped me onto the table and adjusted the weighted vest. And what stood out the most was his melodic Irish accent. And he just emanated kindness.

And I’m not sure what came over me, but as I was lying down on my back waiting for the X-ray and holding my scarf, I told the man that people stared at me and how much it upset me. And I hadn’t prepared for that with cancer. I hadn’t prepared for the staring. And he looked at me right in the eyes and said something that took my breath away. He said, they’re staring at you because you’re beautiful. And it was said with such kindness and sincerity that it still stays with me today.

HADDAD: I might have asked his name at the time, but with chemo brain and the years that have passed, I’ve forgotten it. I hope he is listening. His innate kindness that day made a terrified cancer patient feel, well, beautiful. **END.**

## Can We Embody Hope?

Years later, she remembered this man and his kindness at a time when she felt alone, ostracized by the way people stared at her, and afraid.

What did his words and action mean to her?

- You’re beautiful. You’re not alone.
- You still have cancer; I myself can’t fix that, but you’re not alone.

Jesus wept. Even when this event—the death of Lazarus--was somehow “for God’s glory” or even when Jesus knew that somehow the death of Lazarus was not the end, Jesus wept. He didn’t wipe away the tears of Martha and Mary, telling them not to cry. He didn’t minimize their pain or even say it would be all better, if they’d just wait a few moments . . . He wept alongside them.

Is that a peace and a comfort and source of hope that we can know? “Can these bones live?” Where can we discover hope?

**“If you had been here, my brother would not have died,”** that yearning cry of Martha and Mary’s, is a form of prayer. It is trusting God enough to express, “This is my deepest longing or urgent need.”

A contemporary catechism talks about prayer and about how God responds. Here are some excerpts:

**Question 120. What is prayer?<sup>1</sup>**

Prayer means calling upon God whose Spirit is always present with us. In prayer we approach God with reverence, confidence and humility. . . When calling upon God to hear our requests, we affirm that God draws near in every need and sorrow of life, and ask God to do so again.

**Question 121. What is the purpose of prayer?**

Prayer brings us into communion with God. . . Through prayer God frees us from anxiety, equips us for service, and deepens our faith.

**Question 122. How does God respond to our prayers?**

God takes all our prayers into account, weighing them with divine wisdom, and responding to them by a perfect will. Although for the time being God’s answers may seem beyond our understanding, or sometimes even bitter, we know nonetheless that they are always determined by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God answers our prayers, particularly for temporal blessings, only in ways that are compatible with the larger purposes of God’s glory and our salvation. Communion with God is finally the answer within the answers to all our prayers.

May we trust God with our deepest yearnings and discover that God is present with us, no matter what we face.

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<sup>1</sup> The Presbyterian Study Catechism, approved by the 210<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.) <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/study-catechism-full-version/>