**SERMON 29th MARCH 2020**

**LAZARUS AND EZEKIEL DEM DRY BONES**

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*Prayer: God be in my head and in my understanding, God be in my eyes, and in my looking; God be in my mouth, and in my speaking; God be in my heart, and in my thinking; God be at my end, and at my departing. Amen.*

It could have been any family two sisters and a brother how many of you have a similar family make up? When a member of our family becomes unwell it is such a worry for everyone, we want to make things better for them and sometimes we can’t so we support them the best way that we can through prayer through just being with them, holding their hand and giving them strength the best way that we can.

Today however with this 4-week lockdown, if one of us was to get unwell we will have just those in our family bubble who will be able to care for us. If one of us were to sadly experience a death over this lockdown period only your family bubble will be able to farewell the deceased. Your loved one will be picked up by the funeral director and he/she will take them to the crematorium or gravesite on their own. No one else is permitted to accompany or attend the final resting place of your loved one. All family cultural traditions, Christian rituals and prayers are not permitted. We can only hope that we could give the funeral director a prayer to be read at the graveside before lowering the coffin on our behalf. A dear friend of mines mother died yesterday on the first day of lockdown, she is Maori and they will have to come to terms with the strict rules that exist around funerals as I have outlined. We will prayerfully remember all the families who are dealing with bereavement at this time.

Mary, Martha, experienced the sickness and death of their beloved brother Lazarus. Mary was the sister who loved to listen to Jesus. Martha was the sister who loved to serve others. Lazarus was the brother who was ill.

Each of us, from the smallest household, to the largest extended family, has people who like to listen, people who like to serve, and people who are sick. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They keep showing up in the New Testament, and they keep showing up in churches and in our families.

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Delay. Delay. Delay. The story of our lives. Why doesn't Jesus drop everything he is doing and rush over to see Lazarus?

"Don't you realize how needy I am?” "If you love me, why don't you respond immediately?” Those are the questions we demand of each other, aren't they?

Ah, but it is not the people who respond most urgently and most anxiously who love us most. Often, the people who are willing to drop everything and help us are the ones least equipped to help. The ones who love us most sometimes take longer to arrive than others.

So, it was with Jesus. He heard the news that Lazarus was ill, and he waited two days to respond. It was a long time. It was not because he did not love Lazarus.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Grief, anger, tears, and the shocks and surprises of family life, full of pain, but also full of joy and new life. “If only you had been here our brother would not have died.” When Mary expresses her anger to Jesus he took it all in, he was moved himself, and he wept. But what use are his tears? He purposefully delayed his arrival at Bethany until after Lazarus was in his grave. Why cry now? For Lazarus? For his sisters? Where were you, Jesus? Why save your tears for this day, long after Lazarus has gone to his grave?

I think Jesus tears has to do entirely with his love and compassion for Martha and Mary as well as for his friend Lazarus and even all those who were there that day mourning with the family. Jesus wept also because they were blind to the truth of who he was. He weeps at our suffering because of his love, but his anger is not fruitless or pointless any more than his compassion is fruitless or pointless.

Although Jesus could prevent Lazarus’ death and his sisters’ grief, he deliberately stays away from Bethany until after Lazarus death. What better way to show his love for his friends, to demonstrate his power over death, and to get the attention of a culture on the new things that he as the son of God can do.

It was customary for the community during the time of this story to gather round in collective mourning pretty much what many of us do today with the exception of this time of the Covid19 lockdown period. Note that it was the Jews who mourn with Mary. The bodies of the deceased were washed, anointed with oils and spices, then wrapped in strips of cloth and hastily buried before decay could set in. It was believed that the soul lingered near the body for three days. By the fourth day, there was no chance that Lazarus might be “only sleeping.” Lazarus at the moment of his raising was not a glorious, angelic-looking being clothed in radiant light He was a rotting corpse wrapped in burial cloths. Martha says, “Lord already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”

Jesus still weeps, for each of us – he does not ignore the pain of our illnesses, our hurts, and the terrible things that life sometimes deals out to us. The healing new life of the spirit comes, not when we’re looking our best, but when we are at our worst and most vulnerable: when we are lying in hospital beds with tubes in our bodies; when we are sick or bleeding or in pain; when our minds are troubled or depressed.

The other point to remember is that Lazarus didn’t ask to be raised. He was already dead! It wasn’t any action of his that brought him out of the grave, but the faith of his sisters and the utter conviction that Jesus had, that as he called upon God, new life would pour out on Lazarus and bring him back to life. We are not expected to perform miracles on our own behalf. But if we continue to grow both in faith, and in community, both will sustain us in our own weakest and darkest hours.

There are times in our lives when we have to do what we can and let God do the rest. Lazarus’ sisters and the mourners gathered with them had done all that they could. What we discover is that Jesus was not really absent as Martha and Mary supposed. He said at the beginning of the story, “This illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God’s glory.”

The presence of God covers the whole story even when – and perhaps especially when – the sisters are least aware of it. When we gather around the graves of loved ones – that may be a time when we are most aware of God’s presence.

In the book of Ezekiel, we again read of a situation in which resuscitation seems impossible. The prophet journeys by the Spirit of God to what reads like the site of a terrible battle. Bones lay scattered all around. Death reigns. That valley sounds all too familiar. It did to those in Ezekiel’s time who grieved the separation of exile. It still does today for those weighed down by the separations and dying’s that leave us feeling very dry, like those bones.

A few years ago when my husband Rewi was alive, he had a cardiac arrest at the gym and his trainer had to perform mouth to mouth resuscitation on him and he said “he could feel the breath of life come into him” he was conscious, he could breath, and he was alive. Thank God. That’s the sort of resuscitation that God breathes into our lives to give us new life, new purpose, new direction. It’s like a baptism of life breathing hope, faith and direction into our lives.

When God speaks like in the creation story in Genesis 1, life arises. When the Spirit brings breath (a single word in Hebrew, ruach, means both spirit and breath), hope takes on sinew and flesh and skin.

For God will gift us with the same Spirit who breathed life into dry bones, raising us to new life, new baptism, new hope. In that hope is our life and peace.

Let us pray…Loving God, we come to you from our homes as we await for this terrible coronavirus to depart from us. We believe that you are the God of resurrection, that out of our darkness and sorrow you give us life and life in all its fullness. Be with us today as we await your healing and hope for our world. We ask this is Jesus name. Amen.