

Sermon for April 2, 2017 (Lent 5, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11 (selections)
Know what: people need hope to live, Jesus calls Martha back to the present
So what: we are never devoid of hope because of who God is
Now what: live here and now in the reality of God's power and presence
Title: I AM the Resurrection

I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord.
Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he die.
And everyone who has life, and has committed himself to me in faith,
shall not die for ever. (*The Book of Common Prayer, p. 491*)

My dear friends, these are the words that begin each funeral service in our church.
Today, we get to hear them in their original setting in the story of the raising of
Lazarus from the Gospel according to John.

These are words of profound hope.

And what I am wondering today is this:
Have you ever been in a seemingly hopeless situation?
Do you know what that feels like – to be hopeless? To have lost your hope?

For those of you who are not quite tuned in to these matters, let me tell you that
today is Opening Day for Major League Baseball.

So, yes, we may have a blanket of snow still on the ground – it may look and feel like
we live in a frozen wasteland – but there is hope! The Boys of Summer are back on
the diamond today, which means that Spring really **MUST** be here after all!

And, lo and behold, the Chicago Cubs open the season as World Series champs.
For one hundred and seven years, Cubs fans came to the end of each disappointing
season and repeated that same sentence of consolation declared by sports fans
throughout the world: "Well, there's always next year!"

To be the loyal fan of a perpetually losing team is to believe in hope!
“There’s always next year!” Believe me, I know all about this.

This grand vision of Ezekiel is all about inspiring hope in the midst of a hopeless situation. Remember that this prophet is living and speaking in exile, by the waters of Babylon, in the land known today as Iraq.

Their once proud nation has been destroyed. Think of 9-11, but ten times worse, because the enemy actually destroyed the entire city and took over the land.

And the Israelites had no hopes of fighting back to regain control of their homeland. They were completely outmatched. What else could they do now but pray and ask?

Though, I am certain, that many found it much too difficult to pray. It seems that among the exiles in Babylon, the mantra among the people was this: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” (Ezekiel 37:11).

But Ezekiel stands up to set the record straight: “No, you are not cut off completely! No, your hope is not lost! Because GOD is still God! And God is not yet done with you!”

To be fair, the people had a point. At least, as far as the human eye could tell, there was no hope for restoration of the old glory days of David’s kingdom.

There did not seem to be any silver lining to the cloud of darkness and despair that hung over the people.

Grief is what they were experiencing. And grief, my friends, is always about the future. Grief is about looking into the future and being unable to see that which you love and cherish there. What matters is how we perceive the future.

When Rob Voyle was with us last weekend, one of the memorable things that I learned from him was a simple teaching exercise which is called “How To Be Miserable.” It’s quite simple, really, and I’m going to teach it to you real quick, because this is something everyone should know, right?

Well, are you ready? THIS is how to be miserable. It's easy, just complete this sentence: "I will be happy when..."

There. Do you have your conclusion? See how simple that is?

But if you want to be REALLY miserable, then you can take one further step and make your future happiness contingent upon the actions of others. So then you say, "I will be happy when he or she or they do X." Whatever X might be for you.

It's guaranteed to work! Say that to yourself every single morning when you wake up, and you will be so miserable that no one will want to be around you!

That little exercise helps to make one thing clear: asking for and waiting for something in the future is not real hope!

Real hope is found when we can embrace our present reality.

In this way, we can see how the Lord Jesus teaches Martha about hope, about how hope is found in the present, in this story of Lazarus' death and the sisters' grief.

Martha goes out to meet the Lord on his way into Bethany. Jesus says to her, "Your brother [Lazarus] will rise again." Martha did not quite understand this. Can anyone blame her? So she says, "I know that my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

It's understandable that Martha was confused. The sudden death of a loved one causes life to become very confusing for most people. So she leans on a familiar crutch, a common doctrine of faith in her community. On the last day, on the great day of the LORD, the righteous will rise up to eternal life.

That's all well and good and faithful and right. But that's NOT what Jesus is talking about!

Jesus says to her, "I AM the resurrection and the life."

Do you see what he is doing, my friends?

REAL hope is not about a wish for the distant future. Something way off in an ethereal world that might come to be one day.

No, real hope is found now!

In a sense, Jesus says, “Don’t sit back waiting for a glorious new life in the sweet by-and-by. I AM the resurrection and the life. Right here and right now! Today!”

This resurrected life is present and available NOW, because the Lord lives.

Martha and Mary and Lazarus and you and me – we do not have to wait for the promise of the last day to live a life of resurrection!

We can embrace the new life that Christ gives today!

And there is a connection here to the vision of Ezekiel.

Now, the prophet Ezekiel had this vision perhaps 550 years before the Incarnation. Of course, he did not have the full insight and awareness and knowledge that we find in the Lord Jesus.

But even his vision is connected to the Lord’s teaching.

Reading it in English, we have difficulty seeing the rhetorical devices at work in the original Hebrew.

All of the words referring to spirit and wind and breath are the same single word in Hebrew: ruach.

This is intentional. The language seems clearly designed to remind the hearers of the very beginning of Creation, the first chapters of Genesis, where the wind of God, the ruach, swept over the original waters. And where that same ruach of God blew the breath of life into the first human.

It’s as if this entire vision of Ezekiel is based upon the reality of God as Creator.

Yes, there is a clear future orientation in the vision, but it seems intended to inspire hope by reminding the people that the Creator is still at work, still creating and making good things out of the chaos caused by fallen human beings.

Yes, Jerusalem is in ruins. Yes, the temple is destroyed. But God is still God.

God is still breathing spirit, still blowing the breath of life into those walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

Hope is real because God is with us – right here and right now.

Jesus stood before the tomb of Lazarus and thanked the Father for always hearing him, then he shouted out with a loud voice: “Lazarus, come out!”

And the breath of God blew into Lazarus once again.

My friends, have you ever been in a seemingly hopeless situation? And felt like you lost your hope?

This much I know, that human beings cannot live without hope.

And I know this: it is the presence and power of God that bring hope.

And that presence and power is at work NOW in your life, if you remain open to it!

And that is our true source of hope each and every day of our lives.

Thanks be to God. Amen.