

April 2, 2017  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
John 11:1-45

Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones is not just a vision in our world. If you venture into the northern Syrian desert you will come to a place where you can dig, dig just about anywhere, and you'll find dry bones. The bones are very dry. You pull the dirt away and the air hits them and they crumble to dust. It's the place where the Ottoman Turks perpetrated the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, murdering about one million Armenian Christian men, women and children.

We're repulsed by this horror just as we are at the pictures and videos of victims of the Holocaust, Pol Pot's killing fields, Stalin's purges or any of the massacres perpetuated by our race on one another. And while those are numerically great carnages of history, our individual sorrow is as bad when the single death of a loved one or one's self touches our life.

So we don't have much trouble empathizing with Mary and Martha in our Gospel lesson in their grief about the death of Lazarus. And thanks to God's gift of faith in Jesus we share Martha's hope when she says, "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*" But she, and we, still grieve. Even Jesus grieves at death. He weeps at it.

But there is an aspect of this story we tend to miss because we don't spend enough time reading large swaths of Holy Scripture. Even this 45-verse-long reading stops short so we don't get the consequences. You see, this is more than just a really spectacular miracle. This public raising to life of the four-day-dead Lazarus is a trigger which sets in motion the events of Holy Week leading to the crucifixion.

This is all by design. Throughout John's Gospel Jesus speaks of how His "hour has not yet come." Well, Jesus is calling the shots in carrying out the Father's promised salvation. Jesus intentionally waits until Lazarus is dead four days and then raises him to life, knowing this will cause the Pharisees, Sadducees and leaders of the Jews to plot how to kill Jesus soon. This resurrection triggers Christ's death.

And this is kind of poetic, because Christ's death triggers our resurrection.

Without Christ, death is just death. Dry bones are just dry bones. This horror that is the wrenching apart of bodies and souls of billions of people throughout history is just that—all horror.

But our God is a God of great reversals, of turning mankind's horrible failings into His wonderful victories. He takes our enmity and rebellion before His face and turns it into peace which passes all understanding. He takes our self-serving pride and turns it into repentance unto forgiveness. At the cross, He takes our condemnation and credits us with Christ's righteousness. He takes our deserved death and gives us undeserved perfect life forever. He takes dry bones and makes a holy people of God.

And we who believe in Jesus can take great comfort knowing that Lazarus's resurrection triggers Christ's death and that Christ's death triggers our resurrection. This comforts us because when we look around, there are a lot of dry, dry bones.

My Aunt Emma is 96 years old and fell and broke her hip this week. Age happens, and bones and bodies get broken, diseased, weak, achy and eventually dead. But it's not just death. Even the youngest among us experiences the wrongness of love drying up where it shouldn't—harsh words are spoken, important relationships are strained and broken, hurts are given and received. Dreams become dry bones as dumb decisions, horrible addictions or maybe just bad circumstances shift our lives down broken roads in bad directions. Some have the dry bones of

solitary and lonely lives, unfulfilling jobs and careers, barren bank accounts or simply lives seemingly without direction—just blowing around in a desert of humanity. There's lots of dry bones.

But we know that triggers have been pulled by God. Jesus in His perfect human life pulled these triggers that He would go to His death; but He also pulled triggers by calling disciples and teaching them the true Law and Gospel of God. He pulled the trigger on our condemnation in declaring "It is finished"—that our debt for sin stood paid in full.

He pulled the trigger on His church just before He ascended, commissioning the apostles to make disciples, teach and baptize. The Holy Spirit pulled the trigger at Pentecost, filling Christ's followers with gifts of understanding and proclamation that the Scriptures would be written for our benefit and the Word of Salvation spread through the world and through history.

He pulled the trigger in your Holy Baptism, washing you in the rebirth of water and the Holy Spirit, forgiving your sins and ushering you into the kingdom of God. He pulled it again in the absolution, declaring your forgiveness again in authority. He will pull the trigger of salvation again in a few minutes as you receive Christ very body and blood in the Holy Supper and receive salvation, life and forgiveness.

You can take comfort in Christ knowing that even the worst of your earthly circumstances, of your dry bones of a fallen world, our God is working—pulling triggers in your present reality—that accomplish your forgiveness and lead to life everlasting.

Those Armenian Christians, what they endured in life was horrible. They were marched out of their homes and if they lived through the march to Syria, they were separated from their families and slaughtered. What happened to them was the evil of this world made manifest in its worst form possible. But for all those who believed in Jesus it was just another trigger in the plan of salvation, giving them the opportunity to walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit, and die a blessed death in the faith.

We too, in every affliction of this life—even if that affliction be the death of the body in time—we can endure in the spirit knowing that every trial faced in faith is pleasing to the God who has accomplished by the cross of Christ our salvation! And we can rejoice, even in our dying breath, because we know even our death is just another trigger in God's plan.

You see, the valley of dry bones has to come from somewhere; and that somewhere is us. And you ever notice that nobody ever recoils in horror at Ezekiel's vision. I mean, we even write goofy little songs about it! "Your neck bone connected to your head, now hear the word of the Lord!" Why does this vision hold no fear? Because it tells of the trigger to end all triggers.

This is the promised and certain return of Jesus Christ in glory, and it is the trigger that realizes in completion and perfection the victory over death that Christ has already accomplished by His cross and empty tomb! *"Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord."*

Whatever pain, trial or affliction you may be facing these days, view it in light of this promise and consider whatever it is to simply be one more trigger in God's plan. Christ's death was your death to sin. His resurrection triggers today and into eternity, your dry bones giving way to life everlasting.

Amen.