

Over the past several days, many of us have seen the photos of Grand Central Station, the square around the Eiffel tower, Times Square, or the streets of Venice, all looking eerily empty. We are used to seeing such famous landmarks bustling with people headed to and from work, tourists posing with their cameras, and other people all jammed in together one on top of another. Instead these past weeks, we've seen emptiness in these places that seems to really hit home just how significant this pandemic really is.

And I wonder, if Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones had been in March of 2020, if it would have looked something like these photos. This image of a valley of dry bones evokes similar emotions—fear, anxiety, grief. Ezekiel is a prophet, living in Babylon. Like us, Ezekiel was living in a world that all of a sudden felt completely unfamiliar, dangerous, and strange. Ezekiel and the other exiles would have known what they left behind—a destroyed city, many deceased friends and relatives. They were waiting for God to act, to speak a word of hope and life into their current situation—this kind of sounds like what we have been waiting for too.

And in Ezekiel's vision, that is exactly what happens. God tells Ezekiel to speak to the bones—to have breath and spirit enter them. These bones are raised up to new life, and the passage ends with God's pronouncement—I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it! And our Gospel reading for today is an equally triumphant and exciting story. Jesus' friend Lazarus has died and when he arrives there Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead as a sign of his power and status. Oh, how wonderful to read stories of resurrection in the midst of such a fearful time.

But is that all these stories offer us? Hope that when we die we will experience new life? Do these stories actually offer something far greater than that? When Mary is speaking with Jesus, she affirms that she already believes that Lazarus will be raised in the end—the final resurrection of the dead, but Jesus tells her that Lazarus will experience life again in the here and now. In the midst of a situation of death and grief Jesus speaks a word of life, and in the midst of exile, unfamiliarity and fear, God gives Ezekiel a vision of life and hope.

How might God's promise of new life invites us to hope? It invites us to live beyond our own fears and anxieties for the sake of others. While much of the world, our nation, and our community lives in fear, I continue to see signs of hope. I have seen signs of hope as many of you reach out to others to check on them. I have seen signs of God's life as Cheryl, Shanda and volunteers work to provide meals and safety for Family Promise Families. I've heard stories of God's promise of life as Action Center employees and volunteers work to serve the homeless. I've seen hope in the tenacity and courage of medical workers and community officials that put their own health on the line for our sakes. Yesterday, I went out to check the mail and next to our mail boxes someone from our neighborhood had posted a small sign that said "If you are over 60 or immune-compromised and in need of groceries or medications, call Steve, I'm happy to run errands for you."

The vision of the valley of dry bones isn't the end of the exile for the people of Israel. Lazarus is raised from the dead in our Gospel reading, but he will die again. Neither of these stories offer us escapism or an easy exit from the problems and anxieties of this world. Instead, what God offers is the reminder that God is always working to bring new life in the midst of dire circumstances. These stories invite us to hope and trust in God's promise and faithfulness—in the midst of the Babylonian exile, in the midst of grief over Lazarus's death, and even in the midst of a global pandemic.

Thanks be to God. Amen.