

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As the crisis of disease and illness continues to increase across the entire world, this Fifth Sunday in Lent shows us Jesus' power over death and brings us some of the most powerful and moving stories of the Bible. The prophet Ezekiel prophesies God breathing new life into dry bones. The psalmist declares hope in the Lord. And Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

Through this worship devotional, you are invited to join me in reflection and prayer, thanksgiving and beseeching, forgiveness and blessing. If it helps, please forward this devotional to a friend or family member and invite them to join you by phone or online. Take turns reading the prayers and lessons aloud to one another. Talk about what you hear in the scripture readings. Or simply be together in silence in reflection.

Together in Christ,
Rich

-
Let Us Be Gathered

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

For these last weeks in Lent, Vicky's inspiration for our shared song of praise is *On a Hill Far Away* (also known to us as *The Old Rugged Cross*). While we are unable to join together in singing at this time, there is a wonderful improvisation on this beloved hymn that we can join together in hearing. I invite you to take a few minutes to listen to the video at this link: <https://youtu.be/8w68ugZntRA>



[On a Hill Far Away](https://youtu.be/8w68ugZntRA)

Two years ago, my husband asked me if I could quickly play something to test his new camera. So I reluctantly improvised this on the spot :) I didn't like sh...

[youtu.be](https://youtu.be/8w68ugZntRA)

Gracious God,
have mercy on us.
We confess that we have turned away from you,
knowingly and unknowingly.
We have wandered from your resurrection life.
We have strayed from your love for all people.
Turn us back to you, O God.
Give us new hearts and right spirits,
that we may find what is pleasing to you
and dwell in your house forever. Amen.

Receive good news: God turns to you in love.
"I will put my spirit in you, and you shall live," says our God.
All your sin is forgiven in the name of + Jesus Christ,
who is the free and abounding gift of God's grace for you.
Amen.

Let us pray.
Almighty God,
your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death.
Breathe upon us the power of your Spirit,
that we may be raised to new life in Christ
and serve you in righteousness all our days,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Let Us Hear God's Word

A reading from Ezekiel:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord." (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

A reading from the Psalms:

¹Out of the depths

I cry to you, O Lord;

²O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.

³If you were to keep watch over sins,

O Lord, who could stand?

⁴Yet with you is forgiveness,

in order that you may be feared.

⁵I wait for you, O Lord; my soul waits;

in your word is my hope.

⁶My soul waits for the Lord more than those who keep watch for the morning,
more than those who keep watch for the morning.

⁷O Israel, wait for the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love;
with the Lord there is plenteous redemption.

⁸For the Lord shall redeem Israel
from all their sins. (Psalm 130)

The Holy Gospel according to John:

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But 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." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

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

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

²⁸When 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." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The 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. ³²When 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." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

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

Reflection on the Readings

“Jesus began to weep.”

This bible verse, John 11:35, tends to be well known for its brevity. As above, the NRSV translates the original 3 Greek words of the verse into four English words. (1Thessalonians 5:16 is the verse that gets the shortest translation in the NRSV, “Rejoice always.”) Because of its shortness, it has long been a favorite memory verse for Sunday School and confirmation students. Perhaps it was yours?

But in addition to its concise, succinct wording, the verse is also well known as one that reveals Jesus’ grief at the death of a close friend. And so perhaps it is that quality of the verse – that strong connection to human emotion and experience – capturing our attention and holding it within our memory and our hearts.

Grief is certainly not far from our experience in these days. This past week, we grieve with Linda Rappa and all the Rappa family at the death of her stepfather, Bud Wollin. This past week, many of you have also expressed sharing of sympathy and grief at the death of Amy’s father, Woody. This past week, our mutual grief has grown as the number of deaths in our world due to the COVID-19 has increased to a count of 30,249 at the time I am writing. This past week, we grieve communally as the diagnosed number of new coronavirus cases explodes exponentially beyond 115,547 in our nation and 649,904 around the world. This past week, we grieve from the imposed strictures of social distancing. This past week, we grieve for people becoming unemployed. This past week, we grieve for healthcare workers striving to serve patients in dangerous and uncertain conditions. This past week, we grieve the loss of familiar patterns, known ways of relating to one another, and so much more. This past week, we grieve. And in the week to come, we will grieve even more. We will grieve abundantly.

And so there is some assurance – some level of comfort – in hearing the news that Jesus has, can, and will weep with us in our grief, in our losses, in our despair.

But I strongly believe there is more that the short verse of John 11:35 reveals to us.

It helps me to see it better if I look back just one verse: ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep.

They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” This is so important!

Mary and the ones who were with her could have told Jesus, “Over there.” Or, “In that tomb.” Or, “Around that corner.” But they didn’t. Instead, they made an invitation to Jesus – an invitation to, “come and see.”

“Come and see.” The first time that invitation is heard in the gospel according to John, Jesus is saying it to two disciples who begin to follow. The next time is when Philip invites Nathanael. The woman at the well takes the invitation to her Samaritan community. But now, today, the invitation comes full circle back to Jesus.

And what is Jesus invited to see? It’s human death. It’s the outcome of illness and disease. It’s our despair, our fear, our anger, our angst. It’s our mortality, our sin, our helplessness. It’s our boundaries, our limits, our disabilities and inabilities.

Does any of this scare Jesus away? Does Jesus say, “Ew, what’s that smell? Ick! No thank you.” Does Jesus decline the invitation? No. Instead, Jesus begins to weep.

And it’s not just weeping in grief. It’s weeping in relief, in relationship, in sharing. In a way, it’s weeping in joy that we – together with Mary and the others – are willing to invite Jesus and God to see us in all our weakness and frailty and vulnerability.

If nothing else, this time of pandemic has demonstrated and highlighted our human exposures, our mutual fragility, and our societal failures to act with caring foresight and loving servanthood to one another. It can cause us to want to hide, to give up, to lose all hope.

But that is not where the tears of Jesus’ weeping lead us. Those tears show us that, yes, Jesus is deeply moved and that he will walk with us through the stages of grief. They also show us that grief is not the end.

When Jesus walks to the cross in grief, there is also hope. Jesus grieves with God’s assurance of resurrection at hand. Jesus grieves knowing that Lazarus has already been raised. Jesus grieves while also providing us not just with a foretaste of the feast to come but a promise that resurrection is also for today.

Yes, Jesus began to weep to share in our grief. Even more, Jesus began to weep at an invitation come full circle. And those tears – well, they will water hope, relationship, love, and new life.

Hymn of the Day

Jesus Is a Rock in a Weary Land

Refrain

Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a weary land, a weary land;
my Jesus is a rock in a weary land,
a shelter in a time of storm.

- 1 No one can do like Jesus,
not a mumbling word he said;
he went walking down to Lazarus' grave,
and he raised him from the dead. *Refrain*
- 2 When Jesus was on earth,
the flesh was very weak;
he took a towel and girded himself
and he washed his disciples' feet. *Refrain*
- 3 Yonder comes my Savior,
him whom I love so well;
he has the palm of victory
and the keys of death and hell. *Refrain*

Prayers of Intercession

Turning our hearts to God who is gracious and merciful, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

God of life, bind your faithful people into one body. Enliven the church with your Spirit and bless the work of those who work for its renewal. Accomplish your work of salvation in us and through us, for the sake of the world. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, you love the world you have made and you grieve when creation suffers. Restore polluted lands and waterways. Heal areas of the world ravaged by storms, floods, wildfires, droughts, or other natural disasters. Bring all things to new life. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, show redemption to all who watch and wait with eager expectation: those longing for wars to cease, those waiting for health and medical test results, those anticipating human social contact, and those in dire need of humanitarian relief. Come quickly with your hope. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, you weep with those who grieve. Unbind all who are held captive by anxiety, despair, pain, or grief, especially Linda and all the Rappa family, Vallie, LaVaune, Patty, Kathy, Frank, Lisa, Rita, April, Bev, Bob, Beth, Marlene, and all those we name. Fill us with compassion and empathy for those who struggle, and keep us faithful in prayer. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, we give thanks for opportunities for this congregation to collaborate with our community in caring for the needs of our neighbors and bridging the separations of social distancing. Strengthen our ties with one another, other local congregations, agencies, and services. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, you are our resurrection. We remember all those who have died and trust that, in you, they will live again, especially Linda's father, Bud Wollin. Breathe new life into our dry bones, that we, too, might live with you forever. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

According to your steadfast love, O God, hear these and all our prayers as we commend them to you; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let Us Be Sent in Service

Now is the acceptable time.

Now is the day of salvation.

Holy God, speaking, spoken, and inspiring,

+ bless you, unbind you, and send you in love and in peace. Amen.

Go in peace. Share the good news.