

## *Obedient Participation in the Life of God*

**Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6–11; John 11:1–45**

### **Opening Prayer:**

Lord Jesus, you are the resurrection and the life. Come into every dry valley, deep place, and sealed tomb within us. Breathe by your Spirit where we have grown weary, fearful, or stuck. Speak your life into us again.

Give us grace to move the stone, faith to trust your voice, and courage to leave behind what binds us. Form us into holy people who not only receive your life but walk in it with obedient hearts. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

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### **Opener**

Friends, have you ever seen a creek in late March that looks almost dead? Kind of rare, but it happens... You look down and see that the banks are still brown.

Winter debris has collected in the bends. Branches, leaves, and mud have clogged the flow. At first glance, it can look like the creek has stopped being a creek. But then something shifts. The blockage gives way. You hear movement before you fully see it. Then the water begins to run again. No one created the current. They only cleared what was obstructing it.

Some of us come into worship like that creek. Life feels backed up. Prayer feels thin. Hope feels stuck behind debris. There is a relationship that has gone hard. Maybe grief has gone quiet and heavy. A calling feels buried. Or a part of the soul feels sealed off like a tomb. And when that happens, we begin to wonder whether what has stopped us has ended us.

But the Lenten readings this week say otherwise:

- Ezekiel shows us bones in a valley.
- The psalmist cries out from the depths.
- Paul speaks of the difference between flesh and Spirit.
- John brings us to a tomb four days closed.

Scripture piles up impossible scenes on purpose... Not so that we will despair, but so that we will learn where **life** comes from.

### **Formation**

So, this morning, the question is not whether we can make dead things come to life by trying harder. We cannot. The question is whether we will listen to the Lord who speaks, breathes, and calls life fourth—and whether we will obey when he tells us to move the stone.

## Take Away 1: No situation is too far gone for God.

In chapter 37 of Ezekiel (1–14), he is taken into a valley full of bones, not bruised bodies, not wounded soldiers, but bones—dry bones. The image is meant to convey a sense of being beyond repair. Psalm 130 gives us another setting: not a valley this time, but the depths. Romans 8 (6–11) describes a mindset of the flesh that ends in death. John 11(1–45) gives us a sealed tomb and a man who had been dead for four days. Every reading turns the dial in the same direction: **impossibility**.

Scripture stacks these scenes so that no one mistakes resurrection for self-improvement.

This is important because we are often tempted to divide life into fixable and unfixable problems. We imagine that God can help with the manageable parts, but the truly dead places are beyond reach. **These readings deny that logic:**

- The valley is not too dry.
- The depths are not too deep.
- The flesh is not too strong.
- The tomb is not too sealed.

The first word of this sermon, then, is not instruction. *It is hope.*

Not the shallow optimism kind. Nor denial. And not religious cheerfulness. This is HOPE rooted in the character of God.

If God only worked in the manageable, none of these texts would be here.

## Application

Some of us may need permission to name the dead place honestly:

- A dream that feels forgotten.
- A marriage that feels exhausted.
- A habit that has become a grave cloth.
- A church fatigue that has settled into the bones.

The gospel does not ask us to pretend those places are alive. It asks us to bring them before the Lord of Life.

## Formation

And if the *first truth* is that no situation is too far gone for God, the *second truth* is that life comes not from our effort, but from God's own breath.

## Take Away 2: The Holy Spirit is the agent of new life.

Ezekiel is told to prophesy, but the prophet does not animate the bones. God does. The breath comes from the Lord.

What the breath does in Ezekiel, the Spirit does in Romans. Paul says that the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in believers. That means Christian life is not a self-generated push toward improvement. It is divine re-creation.

That matters because many of us **still treat spiritual renewal like a better management system**. We assume that if we can just reorganize, try harder, get stricter, get busier, or get more emotional, life will return. But Romans 8 does not point us to a stronger human center. It points us to the *indwelling Spirit*.

This is where holiness becomes more than behavior management. Holiness is not the polishing of a lifeless shell. It is life in the Spirit. It is God breathing where there was no breath.

**Get this: God does not stand over the valley with *tips for improvement*; he breathes life where there was none.**

There are seasons when what we call **burnout** is more than **fatigue**. It is a **spiritual dryness** that no technique can finally heal. There are relationships where what we need is not merely a better script but the Spirit's life. There are churches where what is needed is not noise, but breath.

In the Friends tradition, we know something about waiting on God, not as passivity, but as yieldedness to the **living Christ by the Spirit**. We wait because life comes from him.

### Formation

But this life is not only a future category. In John 11, resurrection is not merely promised for later. It stands at the tomb in the person of Jesus.

### Takeaway 3: Resurrection is in the present tense.

Martha already believes in resurrection on the last day; she has traditional future hope. But Jesus does something more startling: *he brings that hope into the present encounter*. He does not merely say that resurrection will happen someday. He stands before the grave as its source now.

This is one of the great claims of the church: Jesus does not simply explain life after death; he interrupts death with his own life.

John 11 is full of tenderness and authority held together. Jesus loves this family. Jesus weeps. He groans. He delays. He arrives. And then He commands. Jesus does not merely visit the tomb with sympathy; he confronts it with authority.

That matters because some Christians know how to speak of eternal life in a way that changes how life is viewed now and, in the time to come. *But Jesus is not only preparing believers for a distant future. He is bringing the powers of the age to come into the grief, fear, decay, and helplessness of the present. And man, Oh Man, do we need this today. The world is a crazy place, fraud is rampant, war is just a half world away... and here at home, trust has been lost...*

**Jesus is not merely promising a future doctrine; he is embodying present power.**

There are people sitting in church who believe in all the right future things yet live in practical despair now (a deep, persistent lack of motivation, a feeling that life is meaningless, and a persistent "heavy" fatigue, often accompanied by irritability and social withdrawal). However, John 11 will not let us keep resurrection at a safe distance. Jesus enters the place of stench, sorrow, delay, confusion, and accusation. He comes close enough to weep, and strong enough to call life out.

## Formation

The Gospel will not let us stop at amazement. The miracle does not end with the raising of life. It moves immediately toward obedience and release.

### **Take Away 4: Resurrection leads into holiness, not mere relief.**

Lazarus is not raised merely so that everyone can have an emotional moment. He is restored to life under the word of Christ.

And brilliantly, Jesus involves the people standing there – it's like he is saying AWAKE-Sleepers... They cannot raise Lazarus. Only Jesus can do that. But they are still told to take away the stone, and after life comes, they are told to unbind him.

This is the sermon's title in action: *Move the Stone*.

Resurrection **is** God's work. Obedient participation **is** ours.

That is the difference between grace and passivity. We do not earn life. We do not manufacture breath. We do not produce resurrection. But when the life of God comes, it calls for a response. Stones must be moved. Grave clothes must come off. Old bindings must be released. Holiness is not the condition for resurrection; it is the shape resurrection takes in a human life and in a holy people.

### Illustration: life-saving surgery

Think of someone who has come through life-saving surgery. The surgeon does what the patient could never do for himself. That is a sheer gift. **But the story does not end in the operating room.** Recovery follows. Breathe deeply. Sit up. Stand carefully. Walk the hallway. Let the tubes come out. Receive help. Learn again how to live in the strength you have been given. None of those actions earn the surgery. They answer it.

That is what John 11 looks like. Lazarus does not raise himself. Jesus does that. But once life comes, the stone must be moved, and the grave clothes must come off. In the same way, the Spirit does not merely comfort us in deathlike patterns; the Spirit reorders us into life, freedom, and obedience.

**Some of us want resurrection without recovery, relief without reordering, and new life without new obedience.**

## Corporate Holiness

And notice this is not only individual action. The community participates in the unbinding. That is deeply important for the church. We are not called merely to celebrate that Christ gives life. We are called to become the kind of people who help one another out of the grave clothes.

That means truth-telling without shaming. Patience without enabling. Love without control. In terms of faithful presence, it means not rewrapping each other in anxiety, reactivity, and co-dependency. It means becoming a steady presence in which the risen life of Christ is not only proclaimed but practiced.

## Formation

So, the sermon lands here: only God raises the dead, but when his life comes, it does not leave us sealed, bound, and unchanged.

## Closing

Friends, Lent is not only the season in which we admit what is dead. It is the season in which we learn where life comes from—and what obedience looks like when life arrives.

By your own strength:

You can obey the voice of Jesus.

You can move the stone.

You can come out when he calls.

And **we** can help loose one another for holy living.

**From despair to breath, from the depths to hope, from flesh to Spirit, and from tomb to life, true life comes from the Lord alone—and those who hear his voice must answer with obedient faith.**

What stone may Christ be asking you to move so life can be more fully received?