

**Yr. A, Lent 5**  
**March 29, 2020**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1495 Words**

**Lessons: Ezekiel 37:1-14**  
**Psalm 130**  
**Romans 8:6-11**  
**John 11:1-45**

There was a couch in Dr. Gibson's waiting room, covered in textured vinyl which made it easy to wipe off the germs, I suppose. I remember scraping my 8-year-old fingernails back and forth across it, because it made an interesting noise. I probably irritated the other patients. Shades of amber and avocado in the upholstery, curtains, and lampshades blended with brown hues in the exposed brick walls.

I hated being there. Of course, I was only *ever* there when I felt terrible—when a dissolved aspirin in a teaspoon of Coca Cola would not arrest my fever or when the searing pain of methylate drops would not stop an infection.

The worst thing was this dark painting by Sir Luke Fildes, hanging over that couch. It features a doctor leaning in under lamplight, examining a *young* patient who is lying helpless on a pair of kitchen chairs—pushed together, converted into a bed. There are two anxious parents waiting in the shadows to hear what the doctor will say.

I *hated* that painting. I guess I can see how you might like it if you were a doctor. It shows a skilled, caring professional, calmly at work when the chips are down. But as a little boy—a *patient*—I could only identify with that frighteningly sick child. That is why I always wanted to sit on the couch—so I could look the other way. I could look out the window instead of looking at that dreadful painting. As I said in last week's sermon, "We see what *we want to see*; we *don't* see who we don't want to see."

Now step with me out into a dry, desolate valley—a valley completely shrouded in the dreadful shadow of death. Was it famine...genocide...a plague? Why were all those thousands and thousands of bones out there? All we know is that the prophet, Ezekiel, was pushed out of his comfort zone. He was compelled to sit and look *directly* at hopelessness.

Please remember this: prophets are real people, called by God to see what nobody really *wants to see*, and then to speak daring, challenging words that nobody really *wants to hear*. In Ezekiel's case, there wasn't anyone else *around* to look and see. There was no one else around to *speak*. There wasn't even anyone else around to *hear* Ezekiel's foolish-sounding prophesy.

Life can be like this. Sometimes we wonder if anyone else sees what we see. We're tempted to think it might be easier to just take a seat on the couch and look the other way, all alone. It might be easier to just keep quiet, and not *ask* for too much. Maybe we should look the other way and not *hope* for too much.

Well, this is *not* what Martha did! When she heard a rumor that Jesus was coming, she got up and walked out of the village and down the road in order to confront Jesus, face to face. She went there to look him directly in the eye and say what was on her heart. I think she may have been inspired by the Psalm we just sang, "Out of the *depths* have I called to you, O Lord. Lord, *hear my voice!*"

Have you been there? Have you done that? I learned a long time ago that Jesus can take it. Faith—*trust*—means speaking the truth. God knows it, already! Just *say* it!

“Lord, if you had *been here*, my brother would not have died.” Lord, if you had been here, this pandemic would not have spread. Lord, if you had been here, my job would not have been cut, my marriage might not have failed, my savings would not have evaporated, my addiction would not have escalated, my grief would not have turned into depression. Just fill in the blank with whatever fits...and then *pray* ‘out of the depths’...of your soul to the One who is willing to meet us, face to face, and hear the truth from us.

Faith means not just taking a seat on the couch and looking the other way, *all alone*. Faith means not just keeping quiet, afraid of asking *or hoping* for too much. Faith means trusting God enough to *directly* face our fears...our losses...our infirmities...our disappointments...or our regrets. Faith means trusting in Love enough to face our *dis-ease*—with the assurance that God-is-with-us *in those depths*.

Look, if our God was afraid of hopelessness, he would not have insisted that Ezekiel look like a fool, prophesying to a bunch of dried up bones. If our God was afraid of hopelessness, he would not have walked into a stinking tomb to call forth Lazarus.

Jesus said, “I *am* the resurrection and the life.” And he said it *before* he rose from the dead...He said it *even before he raised Lazarus from the dead*. This is easy to miss, but resurrection life is *personified* in Christ, the healer, who *first* meets us on the road, *directly*—face to face.

The resurrection life of Christ, our healer, *begins* when he listens to our prayer, our lament, our complaint, *directly*—face to face. Christ *first* listens, and then reminds us that we belong to him and that *nothing*—neither life nor death, nor things present nor things to come, *nothing* in all of creation can separate us from his love, period.

With *that kind of trust*; we can do anything...and we can *endure* anything. For we do not suffer or sorrow as those without hope. Our hope is founded on the Good News that God has breathed God’s own Spirit *into us!* And, as we just heard from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, *this Spirit* of our Father in heaven who raised Jesus, *this Spirit* will *also* give life to our mortal bodies.

Here we are in the midst of a pandemic that attacks our breathing, reading lessons of hope about the *breath of God*—the *Spirit* of God who moved over the waters in creation, the Spirit of God who *in-spired* the dust from which we are made, the Spirit of God who *in-spired* the bones of a dead-and-gone Israel through the prophet, Ezekiel, the Spirit of God who called forth the breathless corpse of Lazarus from the grave.

Eventually, the door would open. “Furman Lee,” the nurse would call out. I would stop my nervous scratching of the vinyl couch, and stand up—with that dark, dreadful painting over my shoulder...*behind me*. I was called—literally called—from the shadow of my worst fears to meet the doctor—*the healer*—face to face.

The exam room had nice, bright lights. There were no haunting paintings anywhere. The crisp, clean paper, pulled tight across the exam table, would crinkle as I climbed up, using the little foot stool for a boost.

He would always tap on the door with his knuckles, and then it would swing open. Dr. Gibson—tall, calm, and always smacking his gum, the way my mother told me not to do. I *loved this* about him. I think he did it to help the little ones like me relax, and maybe even smile.

The other thing I remember is how he always started with a kind word. He saw *more than sickness*. He could also see and take a moment to celebrate what was good or healthy or wonderful about his patients.

And then he would listen to my complaint...like Christ, the healer. This may be one of the places where I learned to leave behind the kind of dark, haunting images that make you want to look the other way, all alone; and to try—instead—to search for the healers, the helpers, the Christ figures who are willing to look directly at us—to meet us face to face, to see in us more than our *dis*-ease, and to listen. Look for those who are unafraid of hopelessness, because they are the prophets who are on the side of God...they are the healers who are on the side of love.

If you are tempted to think it might be easier to just take a seat on the couch and look the other way, all alone; I understand. If you think it might be easier to just keep quiet, and *not ask* for too much or look the other way and not *hope* for too much; I understand.

But the truth is we have been called to *more than that*...we have been called to trust in the all-powerful love of God. We are called to trust the Spirit of God...a Spirit unafraid of hopelessness.

This same Spirit dwells deep within you, giving life to your mortal bodies, giving peace to your restless souls.

Among the swift and varied changes of the world, this Spirit is calling back to you...out of the depths, saying “Fear not, o mortal. I am the resurrection. I am the life. These bones shall live!”