

Lenten Worship Series: Christ Acts For Us; Sermon Title: A Glimpse of the Future
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45
Salem United Methodist Church; March 29, 2020
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I've heard that laughter is good for the soul and that laughter facilitates healing. We need something to lift our spirits need as we face the grim reality of over 2000 American deaths and over 30,000 deaths worldwide. Heaven is a busy place these days. I found some hopefully appropriate corona virus jokes to lift our spirits.

If I tell you a coronavirus joke, you have to wait two weeks before you get it.

Quarantine is suited for introverts. They finally can experience a world that is suited for them. With events cancelled and with being required to work at home, introverts don't have to go through the trouble of faking the enjoyment of being with other people. Or required to make random small talk or have physical contact. Quarantine is an introvert's dream come true.

How can you stop a robbery? Cough on the robber.

Prediction: There will be a minor baby boom in 9 months. Will this generation be called the Coronalls? And then when they are thirteen years old, will we witness the rise of The Quaranteens? These jokes are groaners at the very least. One thing we know is that this pandemic is no laughing matter. In the midst of a hopeless situation, can we have hope?

I read these scriptures last month when I planned for Lent. I saw them then as a glimpse of the future – the continued Lenten journey to the cross, so I titled this sermon as, "A Glimpse of the Future." Each passage points to the culmination of the season of Lent, the death and resurrection of Jesus. The first passage is Ezekiel's story of "dem" dry bones becoming zombie-like people walking around. These bones in which new life is breathed into recreated bodies is a vision of restoration and hope for the Israelites after the fall of Jerusalem. In the next scripture, the Psalmist cries to God for help, hoping that God will save. Then there is the Romans passage which speaks to the new life we can have in Christ when we die to self. And the last passage from the Gospel of John is the story of the raising of dead Lazarus to life. Yes, all of these scriptures point to the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus in one way or another. But today, with scenes of rows of caskets and trying to rap our heads around the numbers of deaths to the corona virus, these scriptures speak to us in new ways. They give us a different glimpse of the present and the future.

As I see the pictures from Italy and Spain of make-shift morgues lined with caskets, I want God to not give us a vision of dry bones being recreated into healthy, living people, but I want God to actually breathe new life back into these people and raise them from the dead. I plea from the depths of my soul, "Lord, where are you? Listen to us. We need your help. Give us a reprieve. Give us some hope. Breathe life into these dead mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters." Anyone who has lost a loved one knows the depth of pain from the loss, knows the pain from part of your heart being ripped out, knows the emptiness, knows the corpse-like feel of wandering through your days like a body without a soul. We wish with all our might that Jesus would stroll in, weep with us, and then tell our loved one to get up, and come back to life, restored to full health. What a joyous day that would be! Weeping would be no more and laughter would rock the house. But this doesn't happen. Our loved ones remain dead. Then we begin to wonder: Is all this resurrection stuff for real or just a fairy tale or wishful thinking? Our faith is tested. We wonder: Does God even care about people getting sick and dying? Then we think if God did care, God wouldn't allow for "this" – whatever the "this" is - to happen. We can be angry with God for taking our loved one. We can question the existence of God and claim there is no God. Whether we admit it or not, when we lose someone we dearly love, to one degree or another, we struggle with the reality of the loss within the framework of our faith. Some never recover. They will live the rest of their lives not believing in God or being angry with God.

When I think of the 30,000 families who have lost loved ones to this virus, I can't wrap my heart around all the pain these families are experiencing. The loss of one person is enough to halt life for a family for weeks, months, or years. And this is repeated for 30,000 families today. How many will it be tomorrow or next week?

Is this a glimpse of our future? The words of the psalmist resonate with me: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, hear my voice!” Hear all the cries from those alone in overcrowded hospitals struggling for every breath. They have no loved ones to hold their hands and comfort them. They have no pastors, priests, rabbis, or imams to pray with them and usher them into the arms of the Living God. Hear all the voices of people wailing with grief not just from this virus, but from other deaths that are happening. Their pain and suffering are equally as great!

Are these scriptures devoid of our reality of suffering and death? They can seem so. They can seem like wishful thinking. It depends on where one is located in grief. However, from one who is still grieving the loss of our now forever ten-year-old granddaughter, I will argue that if these scriptures spoke of our reality of death, Ezekiel would tell a different vision. He would have had a vision of dry bones turning into dust and being blown away by the wind. Instead, this vision is about God creating life out of dry, dead bones. This vision has God who created all life, rebuilding, recreating “dem” dry bones, connecting the toe bone, to the foot bone, to the heel bone, to the ankle bone, to the shin bone, to the knee bone, to the thigh bone, to the hip bone, to the back bone, to the shoulder bone, to the neck bone, to the head bone. Now hear the word of the Lord! And God breathes into these new bodies, breathes LIFE! I will also argue that if the story of Lazarus spoke to the reality of death as we know it, Lazarus would have remained in the tomb. And Jesus would have announced, “I am Death. I am the end of all life!” Instead, Jesus proclaims, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” These are stories of hope in something that is beyond the control of any illness or disease. Because of the suffering of Jesus during his Crucifixion and death, we can have hope in the midst of our suffering. We can be assured that Jesus suffers and weeps with us. And we can have hope that in the midst of death, we receive life. In two weeks even though we can’t be together in person, we will continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Nothing, not even the corona virus, can stop us from celebrating this! The Resurrection of Jesus is greater than any deadly virus or bacteria, greater than cancers, greater than Alzheimer’s, greater than organ failures, greater than all causes of death. Nothing can stop Jesus from rising from the dead! This is how Christ acts for us!

However, each of us in our own way has to decide if the Resurrection of Jesus is fiction or reality. Each of us will face death one day. That is our reality. It could be from the corona virus, or a car accident, or a fall down the stairs, or cancer, or a violent act. However, when death comes to us, can these stories offer us faith and hope? Can they give us the assurance that we will receive a new resurrected life with God? Also, can these stories give us faith to face the reality of today?

Richard Rohr wrote these words after Easter last year, “Death and life are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other. Each time you surrender, each time you trust the dying, your faith is led to a deeper level and you discover a Larger Self underneath. You decide not to push yourself to the front of the line, and something much better happens in the back of the line. You let go of your narcissistic anger, and you find that you start feeling much happier. You surrender your need to control your partner, and finally the relationship blossoms or ends. Yet each time it is a choice—and each time it is a kind of dying. It seems we only know what life is when we know what death is.”

As we remain in isolation, pay attention to the life around you, the one(s) with whom you are isolated together, the one(s) with whom we dearly love, but can’t be together, the one(s) who are working to keep loved ones alive. Pay attention to life around you. Hopefully through all these deaths, through this glimpse of the future, those who survive will know what life really is and hopefully not forget it.

Reflection Questions: How are you coming to know what life is in isolation? How do you see Christ acting for us in our homes, in our communities, in our nation, in our world in the midst of this pandemic? Do you have faith that when death comes, you will receive a new resurrected life with God?

Resources: *Christ is For Us* by April Yamiasaki; “Jesus’ Resurrection,” April 26, 2019, by Richard Rohr.