

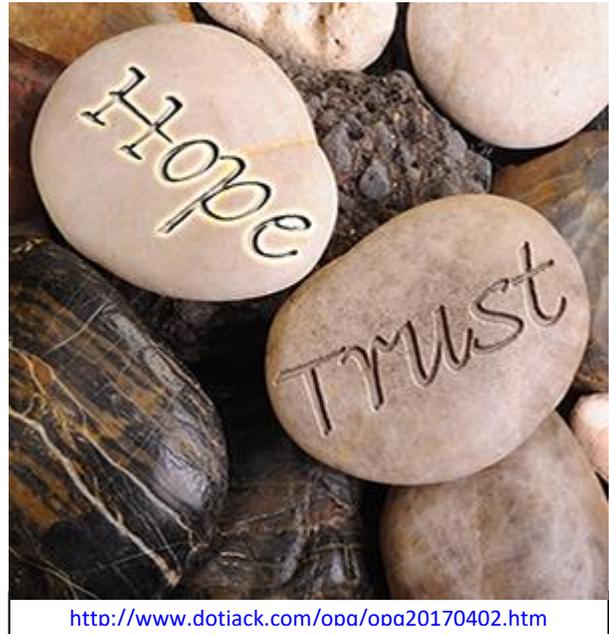
## Hope Way

A sermon for 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, March 29, 2020

by Rev. Lonna C. Lee

Imagine my surprise when I flipped the channel to 312 – CHRISTMAS MOVIES!!!! I was reminded to look up and in this case, change the channel. There is hope.

Having been mired in news channels 24/7 for the last 16 days, I can say that I have been soaking . . . no marinating . . . no drowning in Coronavirus. I have been saturated in the news in ways that are really excessive for a recovering news addict. These last 16 days have been an intense haze of shock, worry, sorrow, anger, and a descent into being more afraid than I ever have in my life. And we are heading into such unknown territory. Much like I felt after the events 18 years ago on September 11.



<http://www.dotiack.com/opa/opa20170402.htm>

Overwhelmed with what is happening in our world . . . feelings of past shock and grief swell up at unexpected times. That is the way grief works, you know? Just when you think you have a handle on it . . . it rears up in the most unexpected ways and in the most unexpected places.

As I ventured into studying the scripture passages for this Sunday, I saw the story of the death of Lazarus in a new way. How overwhelming it must have been for Jesus to lose one of his closest friends to death. So much so, that John records something that no other Gospel writer does . . . it's there in verse 35 . . . the shortest scripture in the Bible. "JESUS WEPT." Besides being the easiest and the first verse I ever memorized, this verse captures the heart of our God. That he wept in a time of intense grief and emotion.

These past weeks have been a time of intense grief and emotion. I have struggled as part of your session to make unprecedented decisions. Suspending church and all the activities we do has been gut-wrenching. It feels like being knocked down yet again when we have been working so hard at keeping the church going when the forces around us – lack of resources, aging membership, the reduced priority of church life in people's lives – have been suggesting that the church (not just ours in particular, but the Christian church in general) is no longer relevant in our world.

On March 8, announcing that we pass the peace at the end of the service by bowing in the tradition of my Chinese ancestors was cute, but also so hard because so much of ministry is touch – handshakes and hugs. Not being able to visit, in person, with anyone in the hospital, to be with them in a time of great need, holding hands and praying is heart-breaking. This time of quarantine has challenged my understanding of what it means to be church when the heart of ministry is touch and we can no longer touch one another.

By all intents and purposes, Jesus relationship with Lazarus was so much like where we are – a time of deep sorrow, grief, intense confrontation with loss through death. Lazarus was beyond touch, four days dead – well past the three days where death is complete in Jewish understanding – already stinking in the grave. Complete separation from loved ones because death was the ultimate state of being unclean.

Jill Duffield, editor of the Presbyterian Outlook writes regarding our readings for today (both John 11 & Ezekiel 37: 1-14):

In this tumultuous season of terrifying, 24/7 headlines, we who have been tasked with preaching to dry bones, we who have witnessed Lazarus unbound and resurrected, need to proclaim in confidence that **God has not, does not, will not abandon us**. Jesus weeps with us. The community mourns together. The wind of the Spirit still blows where it wills and if we pause and listen, we will surely hear the sound and see the impact of it. **Jesus will not ignore our pleas to come and help**. While we do not know when we will return to our churches in person or when we will embrace each other with abandon or when we will get back to work in our offices or find grocery stores with fully stocked aisles, we can be sure that dry bones will become living, breathing human beings. The one who raised Jesus will sustain us even now. And Lazarus, four days in the tomb and decomposing, will make an astonishing return to his family and community (*emphasis mine*).

Do you hear the good news in this? We worship and belong to a God who loves us so much, who cries for us and cries with us. God is here in our grief and sorrow as we face an unknown future. It has been this way all along and continues this way today in the here and now.

The story of the death of Lazarus does not end at death, but at a new beginning . . . a life renewed . . . a life continued. Pastor/Bishop Kenneth Ulmer (Inglewood, California) envisions the animating, life-fulfilling power of the Holy Spirit as like the transformation that comes over the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon figures as they're inflated. Without any air, these huge balloons lay flat on the floor, limp, and featureless figures. But when the wind starts whipping up inside those balloons, they begin to rise, stand up, and stand tall. They become individuals, people and creatures

that we recognize and love. Once on the parade route, these balloons take on even more life, for they are animated not just by the air within them, but by the winds that buffet and bolster them down the street.

In today's gospel text, Jesus doesn't appear before Martha and Mary - who are in agony over the death of their brother Lazarus - just to bring them a casserole. Jesus doesn't cluck his tongue and concede that Lazarus' death is a tragedy.

Jesus goes to his best friend's tomb and calls out, "Lazarus, come forth!" As experienced by Ezekiel and the psalmist, once again the animating spirit of God moves with power and precision, and brings a dead man walking right out of his tomb! This is what God settles for. Miracle, rebirth, deliverance from the pit, and eternal redemption. God doesn't define winning as not losing. God doesn't settle for anything less than joy unbounded, and glory filled dreams fulfilled. (*Leonard Sweet, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com*)

On this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, we get a glimpse of being "born again by the spirit," a peek at the promise of resurrection that we will experience fully at Easter. This is the hope that we live into. The hope that we walk with into an uncertain future. The hope that sustains us when we feel sorrow or grief or fear. The hope that never ends.

In what ways are you living into the way of hope? When it is so easy for us to be mired in our pandemic times, where do you find God's hope speaking to you? How can we as Christians witness to God's hope in our lives in this very moment?

I encourage you (and me) to be about giving thanks for our trouble. Our God does not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted and does not hide his face from them. There is always a sense in which great living is found in the midst of suffering and tears. I end with an old Yiddish folk story. A well-to-do gentleman of leisure was much interested in the Hebrew Scriptures. He visited a wise rabbi to ask a question. He said: "I think I grasp the sense and meaning of these writings except for one thing. I cannot understand how we can be expected to give God thanks for our troubles."

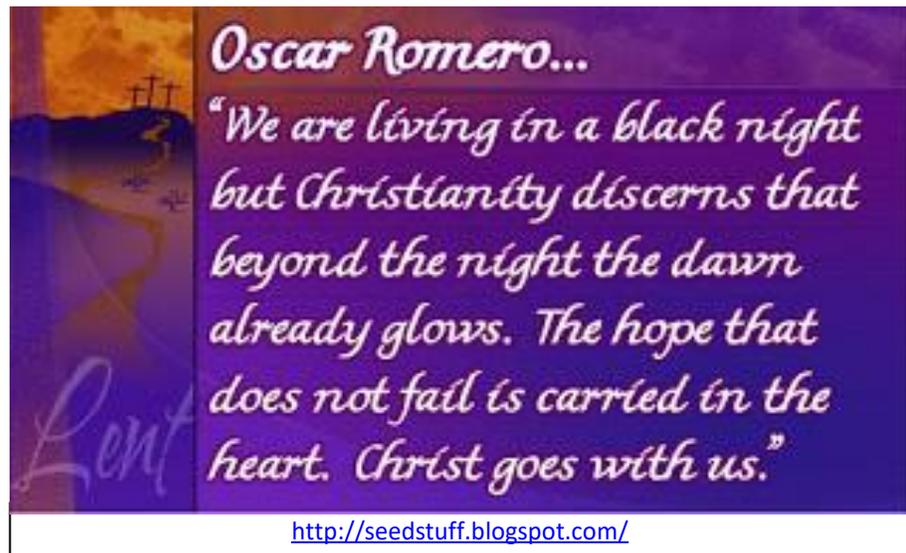
The rabbi knew instantly that he could not explain this with mere words. He said to the gentleman: "If you want to understand this, you will have to visit Isaac the water-carrier." The gentleman was mystified by this, but knowing the rabbi to be wise, crossed to a poor section of the settlement and came upon Isaac the water-carrier, an old man who had been engaged in mean, lowly, backbreaking labor for some fifty years.

The gentleman explained the reason for his visit. Isaac paused from his labors. Finally, after several minutes of silence, looking baffled, he spoke: "I know that the rabbi is the wisest of men. But I cannot understand why he would send you to me with that question. I can't answer it because I've had nothing but wonderful things happen to me. I thank God every morning and night for all his many blessings on me and my family."

It is true, is it not? The pure in heart see God. The humble in spirit know Christ's joy and enter into God's glory. "For I consider," writes Paul, "that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." ([www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com))

Let us pray:

God who weeps . . . who REALLY weeps for and with us and our world, help us to know as you know. In these days of great uncertainty, our anxiety rises as the numbers become greater. You tell us over and over again that we can trust in your care. Open our hearts to see your work in our world. Open our hearts to new ways to serve you in the great need



of our neighbors. In the name of Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life, Amen.

Reflection Questions for this week: (from Presbyterian Outlook):

1. Where, and how, are you called to preach the good news this week?
2. Where have you seen glimpses of Easter in the midst of this somber Lenten season?
3. When you read the text appointed from John this week, where do you place yourself? With the disciples? Mary? Martha? The crowd of mourners? Lazarus?
4. Have you ever experienced dry bones come to life? What happened?
5. For what do you rejoice this week?
6. Where do you most need God to give you life in your mortal body?