

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

March 26, 2023

Seeking: Can these bones live?

Dr. Jo Forrest

Seeking: Can these bones live?

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2023 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: March 29, 2023

Next Sunday, Palm Sunday, we will sing “Hosanna” and wave our palms as we imagine standing with the crowds to celebrate Jesus’ arrival into Jerusalem.

Who doesn’t love a parade, getting whipped into a frenzy when the hero arrives, and clamoring to be a part of a winning team? It is kind of like welcoming the Steelers after a Super Bowl win. I know you still have that jersey you wore, as if to say to the world, “I’m with them.”

The great party of Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, only to be followed the next week with a day-break celebration of what changed the world.

The only problem is that to get to Easter we have to walk through a graveyard. Those who do not have the stomach for it will stay home from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday, showing up just in time for the trumpets.

Thursday attendance will be thin at Westminster, like his first followers. We will vote with our feet to not be near someone on death row.

Besides, spring break lures us away.

In our defense, it’s not that we only want a party or that we are so callous to suffering.

More likely, we carry enough grief already day-to-day and week-to-week that we just don’t want to carry any more.

It’s not that we want to avoid Jesus’ agony from long ago, but we wonder if there is room right now for his suffering alongside our fears.

From the deadly weather. Bank failures. Simmering international tensions. Housing shortages. Labor shortages. People are exhausted from unreasonable demands. Anxiety about kids and school. Parent's declines. Bodily pain.

In a community filled with success, it is sometimes easier to wear a mask that says, "I'm just fine." Sometimes takes all we have to hold that mask in place over the sorrows within. To expose our grief might exhaust us even more.

Maybe that is why the lectionary gives us John's story about Lazarus at this point in Lent. It calls us to the place of grief – long ago. It stirs in our guts to hear someone just like us call to Jesus in anguish.

This story is a kind of rehearsal for what lies ahead, in which Jesus does for his friend what God will do for him.

Fred Craddock claims it "is as though one held up to the light a sheet of paper on which was written the story of the raising of Lazarus. But bleeding through from the reverse side of the paper, and clear enough to be read, is the other story of death and resurrection of Jesus."¹

Today, we confront death to learn about life.

Again, the lectionary reading is very long, almost the length of a short-sermon, before I read and offer a brief summary of the omitted verses, please pray with me.

¹ Fred Craddock, *The Gospels, Interpreting the Text*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981) 141

*Creator God,
Why is bad news so loud?
In the midst of gun violence,
hunger,
tornados,
and anxiety,
it often feels like suffering has a megaphone.
How do we know that you can bring about life in the midst of
sorrow?
Today we bring our raw selves into this space
asking that once more you would
rush through us like a mighty wind.
Open us to hear Jesus and imagine his voice.
and let it be loud enough to speak to the sorrow of the day.*

John 11:1-45 (selected verses)

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha...

³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

⁴ But 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."

(Jesus does not go immediately)

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

²⁵ Jesus said to her,

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”...

³² When **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.”

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”

³⁵ Jesus began to weep.

³⁶ So the crowd said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

³⁹ Jesus 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."

⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

⁴¹ So they took away the stone.

And Jesus looked upward and said,

"Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I 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."

⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

⁴⁴ The 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."

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.

My mom is one of the strongest women I know. Her story sounds like many other farm kids from central Illinois born during the Depression.

Lots of gritty work in garden and barn. Canning and preserving. Sewing. Four H. Church...always church. After university, she followed the usual path to marriage and kids.

My dad traveled so much, she knew the stress of single parenting, made even more challenging because we moved several times, finding ourselves in places without family and friends.

Perhaps she inherited it from her mom, a stern Swede, or maybe just her personality – she is stoic. Rarely did she or does she even today ever cry.

On the few times I recall, her tears seemed to well up from utter exhaustion or frustration, or at the end of her rope with loneliness. If she wept, my heart turned inside out and I immediately dissolved, too.

Who in your life surprised you with tears? A father, defying that social lie, “men aren’t supposed to cry.” Maybe a grandparent? Teacher? Coach?

Why? Why were their tears shed? How did you respond? Did you join or hold out a tissue and look away in shame?

When and where do you cry?

One of the reasons we go to the movies is to let go of all those emotions that we bottle-up.

In the movie *Captain Phillips*, the main character portrayed by Tom Hanks serves as a cargo ship captain who survives a pirate attack and kidnapping.

Once on board the rescuing Naval vessel, the attending medical officer asks, repeatedly about his wounds, “what hurts?” And, she tells him, “you are safe.”

She examines his headwound, then turns over his arms. She points and asks, “is this your blood?”

“No, not all.”

He admits he’s okay. She tells him to breath. He points to pain.

With scissors, she cuts off his tattered shirt, stained with more blood. He starts to cry. All the fear, relief, dread, emotions beyond words, came out in tears. Having stood at the brink of death and survived, he understands what it means to be human: he cries.

In today’s story, how do you understand Jesus’ tears?

Before the cross became a sign of salvation, the cross was God deep in the dark. God in the dark of death and all that death brings. The dark of sorrow and separation. The dark of loss and loneliness. The dark of grief and despair. God in the dark of our sin and injustice.

I think this is one of the reasons Jesus weeps when he learns of the death of Lazarus. He weeps because he has lost his friend. He weeps because he feels the tears of Lazarus' sisters. Jesus knows the finality of death for his beloved friend and faces his own.

He cannot take death away – that's what it means to be human. Even though he knows it will all be okay, more than okay, and it will reveal God's glory; it's not okay right now so he weeps.

By weeping he models what it means to be human, loving one another's life. Loving this life, even though he cannot take death away, he promises two things: death is not the end of our life with God and we can live our life today with the quality of the resurrection. That's why he pushes into a grieving Martha – “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

I often recite that passage while standing with a family at the lip of a grave of their loved one. But, I omit the question, “Do you believe this?” Maybe I should ask it. The words are not for the departed. Like Jesus' insistence with Martha, his words are for us. He asks those living to believe.

Will we believe he is the resurrection and the life, right now? Not at some later date when the world ends. Right now.

This final sign begs us to believe in him. He begs us to believe. This belief is not merely an intellectual consent, as if a noun,

an object to hold. He begs us *to believe*, to walk away from the grave and believe in our doing. Believe as a way of life.

Jesus' tears at that moment stream for his friend and for us as well. He's at the end of his journey, about to show us all of God's glory, for us to make a decision.

In our Presbyterian, Reformed tradition, we worship the risen Christ, choosing to gaze at a symbol of God reaching from heaven to earth, and Christ stretching wide his arms to embrace all. All of the crosses throughout this building and in my home, reflect these joined forces, God reaching down and Jesus reaching out. There's power in the simplicity of an empty cross celebrating the resurrection victory.

This time in Lent, though, we'd be well served to look at the cross with the battered and bruised suffering Jesus nailed to it. Not for the horror, but for the sheer reverence of God's willingness to bear the worst with us.

In the little town of San Jose de Gracia, in Mexico, there is an 82-foot statue of the broken Christ.

The huge stone statue is missing an arm and a leg, and part of the face. The little town is finding it difficult to manage the number of pilgrims who come to see the statue. Thousands of people every year flock to see a broken Christ. The inscription at the bottom of the statue is in Spanish and reads in part:

“Leave me broken. . . I'd like that when you look at me broken like this, you'd remember many of your brothers and sisters who are broken.”²

² <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/santuario-del-cristo-roto-sanctuary-of-the-broken-christ>

Whatever speaks to you, a cross of the resurrection or one holding Jesus' broken body, hold it, remember his tears for your life.

In this Lent, bring him your grief, your brokenness, he will give you strength. Believe, my friends, he will give you life.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org