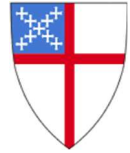




Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

March 22, 2026



[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

[Psalm 130](#)

[Romans 8:6-11](#)

[John 11:1-45](#)

Oh God, our hearts are unruly, our minds willful, our souls perplexed by many things. Still us. Set our minds on you, Holy Spirit, fill our hearts with your life and peace and hope that is beyond all we know. Help us entrust ourselves to Christ Jesus who is even now raising our mortal bodies to new life. We look for you and wait for you beyond all swift and varied changes of this world. Be our dawn, our light, our fire of true life. Amen.

Each day, every day – and in moments throughout each day – we face a choice. A choice to live. A choice to embrace life, dare to live, rise into fuller life, turn to true life as God intended us to live. There is that verse from Deuteronomy that puts this choice plainly before us – not just as a one-time choice, but as a choice again and again throughout our days: “See, I have set before you life and death. Choose life!” Each day, every day, as we rise, let this be our reminder, and our prayer. “God, I thank you for this day, yet another day to live. I choose life, Lord. I choose to embrace this day as the gift you have laid before me.”

We rise with this prayer no matter what lingering, lurking anxiety or sense of dread and uncertainty may arise within us or all around us in our region, our state, our nation, or the world. We take up this prayer in hope and trust, regardless of whether we feel excited about it or dull and dutifully resigned to it or even skeptical about it. We rise to declare hope and trust in God.

We hear today from two great prophets – Ezekiel, and Jesus. Ezekiel lived and followed God’s call to be a prophet during the final years of the nation of Judah. You have heard me speak before of these dreary and dark times, when rulers were again and again turning away from following God’s will. Now, the nation has finally unraveled, and the conquering forces of the Empire of Babylon have taken towns and cities and finally put the remnant city of Jerusalem under siege. They have conquered it and deported thousands away into exile. Babylon returned later and destroyed the city, and carried away a second wave of exiles. This pattern had been going on in Israel and Judah for over 150 years.

The people in exile and the remnant people left behind felt powerless. They felt uncertain about any future, and were in deep, lingering sorrow for all that had been lost, and they wondered if they ever again would be a people together. Everything they had known was changed – and they were no longer who they thought they had been. They moved through their days haunted by these ghosts of anxiety, uncertainty, disillusionment, loss, and unknowing. And, they knew there were many dead as a result of all the battles – and many who remained unburied, scattered in fields where battles had occurred over decades, because no one was going to leave the city to go bury the dead when to do so would be to put their own lives in danger.

And so, Ezekiel is taken by God to see a valley filled with bones. And “bones” in Old Testament text is a word that also is meant to show our deepest sense of self – you know the saying, “I knew it deep in my bones?” And some of the psalms that are cries to God talk about our bones being dried up and hope lost. These bones that Ezekiel saw were all dry – they had been dead for a long time. And God asks Ezekiel a question that dares to speak to possible hope: “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Can life come again? Can hope and the spirit of life be rekindled and being to flow again in these bones?

So, Ezekiel follows God’s calling – to prophesy – to speak with directness about what is and what God desires.

Ezekiel follows God's calling to speak directly. You may wonder why I have stressed, since arriving here and certainly for the last six years, the vital importance of our engaging in courageous conversations. This is one of those moments of choice – to choose life or death – to move into life a little more, or to die a little – to invite greater life, or to allow just a little more death to creep in. It is important that we watch our tongues and practice speaking with wisdom, clarity, and care. But it is also important that we actually speak. You know the saying – Yes, silence is golden, but sometimes it's just plain yellow.

Prophesying – speaking with directness about what is and what God desires – begins with listening – listening to the realities of the world and of situations, listening to people deeply, listening to God. Ezekiel moves with God's invitation to see this vision of what had happened to his own beloved people, to see the deep truth of their dispirited condition.

Ezekiel speaks to the dried-up lifeless bones, and then directly to the Holy Spirit, and then directly to the dispirited people living their shadow-like lives without hope. At God's prompting, Ezekiel speaks a command, a declaration of possibility, to the bones. "Come together! God will breathe new life into you – and you shall live!" Ezekiel then speaks a commanding invitation to the breath of God, the Holy Spirit – "Come from the four winds – come from every place where you already are – and breathe on these here, so they may live!" And then Ezekiel turns from this scene back to the people in exile and speaks a declaration of promise from God, "You are not done yet! I will bring you back from this dark and disheartening place, and you shall live again!"

You shall live.

Prophesy! Speak what brings life. Speak as God leads you. Because speaking God's promises and desires ignites a response by creatures, and by God!

Prophesy to the bones – call out to the bones, witness their condition aloud ("You are dead and dried up"), and speak what is possible with God, what God will do with the dead and dried up. In his deep prayerful vision of this scene with God, Ezekiel speaks – and it happens!

Prophesy to the breath – call out to the Spirit of Life, name what is now and what is needed from God the Source of all Life. Speaking truth, prophesying, is not just speaking to creatures live and dead, but to the breath of God, the Spirit of God, calling on the breath to come. In this prayerful vision, Ezekiel speaks – and it happens!

Words are powerful. Declarations of truth and hope have been sparks of empowering strength for people who have suffered or been oppressed or are in any pain or exile or isolation. They have stirred and enlivened people in all conditions as slaves, and refugees, and diseased, and imprisoned, and poor, and abandoned – people through the ages.

I've quoted before a great book on leadership, called *The Three Laws of Performance*. It charts how big organizations and communities can get stuck in patterns that are deadly, and how the way out takes a change in view. Because, according to the first law, the way things occur to us – the ways we have become patterned to perceive our realities – is how they will be. In other words, how we choose to see and experience and perceive and interact with life around us then ends up shaping what life is. And, according to the second law, a lot of how things occur to us is because of the language we choose to use and the stories we choose to tell ourselves. We can get trapped in saying to ourselves stories of "Woe." But, new life and light can come. And it comes also through a change in what we hear and tell ourselves – it comes with change in language. And, in the third law of performance, change and new life emerge through language as well – and it is not the language of description but the bold language of declaration – it is the language not of

the present as we have continued to describe it to ourselves, but in the bold declaration of a possible and desirable future, that pulls us up with new energy.

This is the kind of Word that God utters, that God told Ezekiel to speak with commanding, strong, appealing language to the bones, and even to God's Holy Spirit, and to the hopeless people. "You shall live!"

This is what we hear directly in the very personal story from the Gospel of John. Jesus speaks, and life happens. There has been a death in a small village outside the big city, in Bethany. It is one of Jesus' dear friends, Lazarus, and the brother of two of his closest friends, Martha and Mary. The home, and the village with them, is mourning and sorrowful. There is the heavy feel of grief in the air, as Jesus enters the village. Martha learns that Jesus is coming, and meets him and walks with him on the road, saying what everyone is thinking – "If only you had been here sooner, you could have made a difference – and my brother wouldn't have died." Mary is grieving deeply in the house, and comes out weeping to see Jesus, and says the same. And Lazarus is in the tomb, already laid to rest. They call Jesus to "Come and See," and then Jesus weeps.

Lazarus in the tomb. The bones of a nation filling a field. Death. The deal seems sealed. A cry, a moan, a sigh comes up from the ground, from bones and even from stones themselves, "How long?"

The cry touches and reaches Jesus, especially through Mary's tears. And Jesus himself weeps. Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, is stirred deeply by the cry of anyone and anything in creation, and weeps because Jesus loves each one.

Just as Ezekiel spoke new, commanding words that declared a bold new future, so Jesus speaks – prophecies – to the people, then to God his Father, and then to Lazarus, and then the people again.

- "Take away the stone. Believe, and see the glory of God."
- "Father, thank you for hearing me."
- "Lazarus, come out!"
- "Unbind him, and let him go."

Each declaration by Jesus takes people to a bold new place. Taking away the stone means opening up again what everyone thought was a sealed deal. Hearing Jesus speak to God in thanks shifts everyone away from the empty space of their grief to looking toward God in hope and trust. Calling Lazarus is a declaration to the one most affected, to be stirred again to life and come forth to be seen. And unbinding Lazarus and setting him free is a final act of letting go of what everyone had wrapped him in to contain and preserve him.

Each declaration calls us gathered around the tomb to move, to see, to experience, to interact in trust. Trust, and hope. Hearing Jesus, we have now set before us life and death, and a choice to make. Trusting Jesus, we can choose life – this day, now, this time, now, this situation, now. Even in the face of death, of loss, of sorrow, of uncertainty for the future.

Even now.

Choose life. Boldly declare life.

Let us spend our days in prayer and praise, in loving care of all we can reach. Let us dare to live into this boldly declared future – calling all we know to live until we pass beyond into the fullness of God's embrace, even making at the grave our cry, "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!"

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.