

Bound and Freed!



FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
THE REV. KATHLEEN D. R. HARKNESS

March 22, 2026
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
of Springfield Township,
in Bucks County, PA

2170 Route 212
Coopersburg, PA 18036
610-346-7282

Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1-45

There once was a man who lived in a valley of shadows. He was convinced that the only way to stay safe from the wind was to tie himself to a Great Rock. He spent years weaving a rope of his own anxieties, regrets, anger and resentment, envy and despair. Not resolving any of them, they wound tighter and tighter around his waist. Eventually, he was so bound that he could no longer reach the fruit on the trees or the water in the stream. He grew thin and bitter, cursing the rope for its grip on him. Every time the wind blew, he made the knots tighter fearing that without the Rock, he would be swept away into the unknown. He found himself inert, unhappy, irritable, and hopeless. They bound him to a state of being, an identity that he adhered to.

One day, a Traveler sat beside him. *"Why do you bind yourself so?"* the Traveler asked him. The man replied, *"To keep from falling,"* the man replied. *"The rope is my safety."* The Traveler reached out and touched a knot. *"This rope does not hold you to the Rock; it holds you to your fear. You have become a part of the stone, cold and unmoving."* The Traveler then shared a simple wisdom: *"You must choose to let go of the strands. But know this: when you are no longer bound, you won't fall. You will discover that your feet were made for walking, not for anchoring."*

With trembling hands, the man began to untie the first knot. He expected the earth to swallow him, but instead, he felt his lungs expand. He unraveled the second, and his spirit began to lighten. Finally, he cast aside the last length of rope. He stood up, his legs shaking from years of stillness. He looked at the Great Rock and realized it wasn't a protector, but a prison of his own making. As he took his first step away, he realized that being free didn't mean the wind had stopped blowing—it meant he finally had the strength to walk through it. He was bound and now freed.

Our lessons today are filled with vivid images...a valley of dry bones, death, sadness, and hopelessness, two prophets--Ezekiel and Jesus, two grieving women-Martha and Mary, a stone lying next to the tomb, a mummy-like corpse tethered in linens. Like the opening of our story, both lessons have a stark beginning.

Ezekiel finds himself in a valley of dry bones, a battlefield. It had been strewn with dead bodies left to rot unburied. Carrion birds and weather had stripped them of their flesh. All that is left are the dried-out bones bound by death. This scene is one of despair felt by those displaced by war. Israel's hope is entirely withered. It is as though they are scattered, bleached, and in a state of *"living death"* where they believe restoration is impossible. They have suffered the horrors of siege, warfare, and exile. Their national hopes crushed, religious faith shattered, social ties severed, economy in collapse, and homes scorched and deserted. The Lord says to Ezekiel, *"Mortal can these bones live?"* *"O Lord God, you know,"* Ezekiel replies.

The Lord tells him to prophesy to the bones, which Ezekiel does. They begin to rattle. They come together. Sinews and flesh appear on them. Restoration begins, but there is no life, no breath. Again, the Lord orders Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. Again, he does and the breath comes, enters them. They come alive. They stand up and live. Then the Lord says they will again be one nation. Once bound, now they are free.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus hears of Lazarus' illness. Jesus decides he will go to him, but the disciples struggle to come to terms with Jesus' decision. They question the wisdom of returning to Judea at all, recalling their narrow escape from stoning just a few days earlier. But Jesus insists that they make the journey.

As they approach Mary and Martha's home, the heaviness of grief and death is overwhelming. Weeping and lament fill the air as family and friends gather to mourn Lazarus's demise and final sleep. It has been four days since Lazarus's death. They mark the completion of the soul's journey from life to death. Lazarus is truly dead. He is now tightly bound in linen wrapping and lies, decaying in the tomb. Martha and Mary are distraught and disappointed that Jesus took so long to get there. *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,"* Martha accusingly says to Jesus. Jesus replies, *"He will rise again! I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they die, will live. Do you believe this?"* Martha says, Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah the Son of God. But she doesn't seem convinced her brother will live.

When Jesus goes to see Mary, she kneels at his feet. She, too, says to Jesus, *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* She is filled with grief. Where did you lay him? And Mary says, *"Come and see!"*

He goes to the tomb and the stone is taken away. Jesus thanks his Father and then cries with a loud voice, *"Lazarus, come out!"* Next Jesus says to the people, *"Unbind him, and let him go."* This is an interesting detail because it indicates that Lazarus doesn't unbind himself. The community unbinds him. He was bound and now is free.

What might these stories mean for us? Has your life ever been so disrupted that you found yourself asking, *"Can these bones live?"* All of us who have passed through—or inhabit the valley of shadows at one time or another. It could be abuse, addiction, displacement, divorce, financial catastrophe, chronic illness, terminal illness, mental illness, or death of a loved one. And so, we know what cataclysmic disruption looks like. We spend our days in survival mode. If we can find the energy to hope, we look forward to a day when we will be through the worst of it, feel like we can stand up, and breathe on our own again.

The man in our opening story lived in a valley of shadows. When the Traveler came, took the time to sit down beside him, and question his destructive behavior, finally he was able to let loose of his fear and untie the tethers so he could be free to live anew. What makes all the difference for us is how God uses people to keep us engaged with life. Sometimes it is through a phone call or an uncannily, well-timed text. Maybe we encounter an occasional visit from someone who is there to listen and bring a different perspective to our situation.

The stories of Ezekiel and Lazarus show us that God's time is not our time. Restoration is a process. Amid painful circumstances and death, we yearn for resurrection and the *unbinding* that releases us to dream beyond the boundaries and to experience life anew. To dream beyond the boundaries is to imagine a world in which wholeness, well-being, health, and prosperity are the norm. It is to recognize that our world is not as it should be. Yet we are invited to consider the possibility of resurrection in the lives of the many persons and communities who deeply need God's presence now.

As Christians, we believe in the power of resurrection. Resurrection and life are central to the meaning that we make for our lives. It informs our sense of Christian vocation. It confronts us as an urgent call, beckoning us to consider the possibility that those whom our world deems socially, physically, spiritually, and emotionally dead might live into a new reality. So we pray for the power of resurrection in the lives of persons and communities bound by the grave clothes of war, genocide, poverty, disease, dis-ease, systematic abuse, and systemic oppression.

Releasing persons and communities from the clutches of death also demands something of us, as did Lazarus' resurrection of his community. Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, but he urged those who were alive and well to *"unbind him, and let him go."* We require caring communities that are willing to nurture and strengthen those who are bound until they are able to walk alone; to remove the grave clothes of self-doubt, social isolation, marginalization, and oppression; to tear away the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss, and grief, so that unbound they might walk in dignity and become creative agents in the world.

In Jesus', name. Amen.