

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (A)

### *Out of the Depths comes New Life*

**Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45**

We know what it's like to lose something or someone that matters to us. It may be the death of a loved one, or perhaps a relationship; the loss of a job, of good health, or the loss of a dream or hope we held. Many in Hawkes Bay and beyond are living with loss of homes, workplaces, orchards, and countless possessions. Today's readings tell two stories about loss. One was about a nation and the other about two sisters, and both these stories are about us. They are stories that point to what Easter is about.

Easter is the highlight of the Christian Year. The purple will be replaced by white and gold, and we shout and sing "Alleluia!" as we celebrate Jesus' resurrection. But to get to Easter morning we have to travel through Holy Week as we watch Jesus fellowshiping with his friends for the last time, being betrayed, arrested, suffering, and killed. We see the disciples scared and confused. They grieve and are fearful as their hopes and dreams are dashed. And all this must happen before we can get to the joy of Easter Day.

Don't rush into Easter morning without first experiencing the preceding days. To only turn up for Easter Day is to celebrate an incomplete Easter. Spend time with the events that lead up to Easter Day. They are events that connect our story with Jesus' story. They tell us what it's like to hurt and be scared, to grieve and lose what matters. Then, and only then, when we've travelled through all that, do we discover that Jesus has risen – that life and love reign as never before, and hopelessness is replaced with hope. We find that we're presented with new life and new possibilities as a love that's mightier than death is made known.

Ezekiel tells the story of a nation at the lowest point of its history. They had lost their king, their capital had been destroyed, their temple lay in ruins, and the people had been taken away as captives into exile. "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." They're like a wasteland of dry bones, scattered across a desert valley – lifeless and arid. They grieve: "God can't help us. God won't help us. There's no God. We've been left here to rot and die. We've become like dry bones."

Ezekiel then caught a picture of hope. He speaks for God and says, "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live..." It's the promise of new life. There is, through all this, hope! "And the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." A people who had reached the bottom, who had given up hope, discover that God takes what is dead and brings new life. God breathes into what is arid and lifeless and gives birth to fresh hope.

So it is with the story that John tells. Lazarus is critically ill. His sisters send for Jesus to come and heal him. But Jesus delays, and when he finally arrives Lazarus is dead and buried. The sisters are grieving. There's no hope. Their brother is lost to them, and Jesus, who could have saved him, has let them down. Perhaps that's our story. You know what it is to grieve; to cry out with the psalmist: "Out of the depths have I called to you O Lord: Give heed O Lord to my cry."

Just like the psalmist, Mary and Martha give voice to their anguish and suffering. They're telling God how it is. This is the raw reality of their pain. We might be like Martha and accuse God: "Why weren't you here? Why didn't you act?" Has God forgotten us? But God hasn't finished. Deep within lament is the knowing that this isn't the end. In the midst of suffering, the psalmist waits: "I wait for you Lord

with all my soul: and in your word is my hope.” Somehow, somewhere, there’s hope.

It wasn’t over for the people in exile. It wasn’t over for Lazarus, or Mary and Martha. It’s not over for us. Death doesn’t have the final word. Despair and hopelessness aren’t the final chapter. With God there’s always something more. But to find that something more we’ve got to be real about how it is.

We can be real because we have a God who is with us. When Jesus arrived what did he do? He shared the sisters’ grief: “Jesus began to weep.” God isn’t removed from our lives. God is with us. “Jesus began to weep.” Those four words tell of God hurting with us – God knowing what it’s like to be us – God going through it with us.

When faced with the tough stuff that life throws up our natural inclination is to take a detour and skirt around it. But we can only know resurrection if we’re prepared to travel through our hurts and fears. Then, in the midst of that honesty, in the midst of our lament, we find God. I’m not talking about positive thinking or some vague optimism. This is about God who is here with us, in all the muck of life, and who draws something new out of it.

There’s hope and courage to be found in the depths of our pain. It’s a hope based on who God is – the God who is in the darkness with us, sharing the desolation – sharing our grief and anguish. Like the psalmist, that doesn’t stop us from ranting and raving at God, but then, gradually, even imperceptibly, we find that we’ve been brought to a new place – a new beginning.

We wish it wasn’t like this. But there has to be an end before there’s a new beginning. Resurrection and new life can only come when the old has died – like Ezekiel’s vision of the scattered bones of a defeated, crushed people coming back to life, and Lazarus coming out of the tomb. They are pictures of how it can be for us.

Paul, writing to Christians in Rome, reminds us that we have the Spirit of God living within. This Spirit is the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. God is within bringing to us, through the losses and griefs that permeate our lives, the gift of new life and new hope.

“I am the resurrection and the life.” This is about life now as much as about life to come. It’s about God transforming the challenges, anxieties, and chaos of the present situation, and enabling us to create something new – creating life in the midst of loss, faith in the midst of despair, light in the midst of darkness. It’s about God breathing new life into our dry bones and raising us from our big and little deaths. It’s about God having the last word and taking what is dead and giving birth to fresh hope.

God of life,  
give us such a vision of your purpose,  
and such an assurance of your love and power,  
that we may ever hold fast the hope  
which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Alister Hendery  
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