From Wilderness to Resurrection Hope

Lent 5: We Choose Life

Readings: Ezekiel 37.1–14, Romans 8.6–11, John 11.1–45

I'm standing here in Bethany or Al-Eizariya as it is called today, which means Place of Lazarus, the village where Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb. Even after two thousand years, the air here seems to hold the echo of that cry: "Lazarus, come out!" A command spoken into the darkness of death and answered by life.

Our readings today all circle around the same question that runs through wilderness places, through exiled hearts, and through communities weighed down by loss. Do we dare to choose life?

Ezekiel's vision begins in desolation. A valley filled with dry bones. A place where hope seems unreasonable, even offensive. God asks the prophet: "Mortal, can these bones live?" And Ezekiel, with a wisdom born of exhaustion and humility, replies:

"O Lord God, you know."

Maybe you know that feeling. The sense that life has come apart, that the ground has given way, that your story is beyond repair. Lent can bring us into that landscape. And for so many across the Middle East today, it is not just a metaphor. A valley of dry bones is the lived reality of displacement, loss, and generational trauma.

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But God doesn't just speak from mountain tops. God speaks into the valley. God calls breath into what has been written off. God stitches hope back into a people who thought their story was over. And slowly, life returns. Not because the people are strong, but because God is faithful.

Moving to the letter to the Romans, Paul tells us that the same Spirit who breathed life into that valley, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, is at work in us. "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you… he will give life to your mortal bodies also." Paul is not offering optimism. He is offering resurrection realism. A way of seeing the world that refuses to be defined by fear, violence, or despair. To be "in the Spirit" is to choose life, even when death shouts louder. It is to believe, and to act as though, another world is possible.

And then we come to this place, Bethany, where Jesus' dearest friends, Mary and Martha, are surrounded by grief. "Lord, if you had been here…"

How many times has that prayer been whispered in hospital rooms, villages and roads, or at gravesides across this land? Jesus does not rush past Mary and Martha's grief. He weeps with them. Even for Jesus, knowing the final outcome did not stop the pain.

continued

From Wilderness to Resurrection Hope

Lent 5: We Choose Life (continued)

> **They choose life. One person, one family, one act of hope at a time. They do what Jesus commanded: unbinding those whom death, injustice, or fear have tried to keep in the dark. And through them, resurrection hope; quiet, persistent, stubborn hope is breaking through in the very places where it seems least likely.**

He walks to the tomb. He asks for the stone to be rolled away. And he cries a command that alters reality: "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus walks free.

And notice this, as so often in the scriptures, God is in the detail. Jesus then turns to the gathered community and says: "Unbind him and let him go." Resurrection is God's work. Unbinding is ours. The question is whether we are willing to loosen the wrappings we place around others and around ourselves so that life can rise, breathe, and flourish without being held back by our fears, assumptions, or expectations.

Here in Bethany, this story points us to the central question of Lent. Will we choose life, life that costs, life that heals? And choosing life is exactly what Embrace the Middle East's partners do every day.

In places overshadowed by conflict, occupation, poverty, and trauma, they are the ones rolling stones away and loosening the bonds that can be so tightly bind people. Clinicians offering healthcare where access is fragile. Trauma counsellors helping families breathe again after unimaginable loss. Educators giving children a future that circumstances tried to steal. Community leaders building peace, relationship by relationship, refusing to surrender to hatred or despair.

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This Lent, Embrace is inviting us to take part in Acts of Hope. Practical, prayerful, justice-rooted choices that help unbind others and ourselves. Acts of Hope are small, doable, but transformative. Choosing to learn and listen deeply to stories we haven't heard. Choosing generosity that makes healing possible for a family in Gaza, Lebanon, or the West Bank. Choosing to pray for peace with honesty and courage. Choosing to stand with our brothers and sisters in the Middle East as they seek dignity, safety, and a future. Each act says, in its own way; 'We will not give death the final word. We choose life.'

Ezekiel's bone strewn valley, Paul's Spirit-filled promise, and Lazarus' rising are not ancient tales to consign to a mythical past. They are invitations to live differently in the here and now. We stand with Mary and Martha in their grief. We stand with a weeping Jesus at his friend's tomb. And we listen for the voice that still calls, "Come out." Come out of fear. Come out of despair. Come out of the narrow stories we've settled for. Come out and choose life.

This Lent, let's open our hands and our hearts, and play our part in God's work of unbinding as we join with our siblings across the Middle East in the quiet revolution of resurrection hope.