

At first glance today our readings seem too much about death and grief for people already enduring the challenge of COVID-19. A field of dry bones, sin and death, and a dead man wrapped in grave clothes and laid in a tomb. I'd far rather be preaching about "His eye is on the Sparrow" right now, but that's why the Lectionary is so precious. It forces preachers to go outside of their comfort zones and preach on all things in all times. But these same readings give us examples of how **NOT** to feel **HAPLESS** (doomed by circumstances) or **HELPLESS** (unable to do what needs to be done) or **HOPELESS** (There's no more point...it's all over). Sometimes, of course, we can't help but feel those ways, and the remedy is to see what God has done, and what God can do. Our hope lies in His Word. Psalm 130:4 says it well "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits for Him, in His Word is my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning. O Israel (read "Church") wait for the Lord for with the Lord there is mercy" I am, and you are, to find hope in the Word of the Lord. Even when frustration brings tears to our eyes; even when our feet stumble about when we feel caught up in circumstances beyond our control, even when we do face the death of one whom we love...in all things, in just the right time, our God can deliver us. He has left us examples in His Word for us to keep in mind; to shape our faith and give us courage. I want to talk about the Hapless, the Helpless and the Hopeless we've encountered in Scripture.

We recently studied the account of a Hapless man – the one who had lain by the side of a pool of healing waters for 38 years. (See John 5:1-9) When Jesus came and asked him if he wanted to be made well, he didn't answer with a simple "yes" or "no". He offered a litany of unfair circumstances, fate if you will, that meant he could never ever be healed. He tells Jesus "I've lain here for 38 years. I cannot move myself. And no one in all that

time has ever helped me down to the water. And people keep jumping in ahead of me. There's nothing I can do. It's hopeless" Jesus does not enter into a philosophical debate about fate or fortune. Jesus just says "Get up, pick up your mat, and walk". And he does. No hapless victim any more. Alleluia!

Or think of possibly the most **helpless** woman we meet in the Gospels. She doesn't blame the fates or the world or anybody but herself. She stands before Jesus just covered with shame and cringing with fear. Helpless entirely. All she sees is Stones...big ones...held in the hands of men who are about to throw them at her and kill her. She can't run. She can't appeal to the law, for it condemns her. She can't say she didn't do it. She did. She's caught like a fluttering bird in a steel trap. Sobbing. Helpless. And Jesus says "Let anyone here who has never sinned throw the first stone". They put down the stones. They walk away. And she is free. Saved. Helplessness dissolved by the Helper. (See John 8: 1-11)

And finally, with great care because we tread on very tender ground, we meet the Hopeless sisters, Mary and Martha. What an awful week or two they've had. Their brother Lazarus became sick. Very sick. They'd run to the door and look down the lane "Where's Jesus?.. He'll come, Lazarus. He'll heal you. He's your friend. He came for weekend. He healed the blind man and the man at the pool and the deaf ones...He will come and heal you". But Jesus didn't come. And Lazarus died.

Well surely, the sisters thought, "Jesus will come for the burial. He'll give us some hope. He'll know what to do and what to say". But Jesus didn't come. Not to help, not to heal, not to bury. And now the funeral is over. And Martha and Mary are hurt, and angry and disappointed.

Then Jesus comes. Martha's words to Him echo in thousands of cemeteries. **“If You had been here**, my brother would not have died.” Or “If you are all powerful, why didn't you answer my prayer for my.... ? If you were truly loving, then..... why didn't you prevent.....? In our humanity, we see the presence of the grave as the absence of God. We feel that if the body is not healed, God is not present, God is not hearing, or God does not care. We find ourselves angry, disappointed and overwhelmed that “God did not come”. Why? Because, like Martha, like Mary, we can be so wounded, so shocked, so disappointed, that our hearts cannot bear it, and have to blame someone. First Martha, then Mary, one by one they confront Jesus “If you had only come...” He feels their pain and anguish. He sees what a travesty death has made, not so much of Lazarus, but of the hearts and minds and souls of two sisters. And Jesus weeps, moved by the raw emotion of fresh, deep grief. He knows how it hurts. He feels it. Then Jesus calls out “Lazarus, come forth”. And he does. Resurrected by the power of God. Walking, talking, breathing, living Lazarus. To die again one day. But now alive. Then Jesus does something glorious...He includes the disciples in the miracle. Jesus called Lazarus forth, but the disciples were told to unbind him and set him free. Imagine that scene. Three days in the grave. The disciples weren't yet entirely sure what they would find under those strips of cloth. It's a wonder they didn't say “Let the sister's do it!” Thanks be to God they obeyed. And we forever have the knowledge that God indeed, and God alone, gives new life to people, but we ourselves are needed to continue the work and unbind the layers that have tied them up, and help them to become free indeed. There are things that only God can do. Those He does. And there are things that we are called to do, with His help, and those things we need to do. To His honour and glory and for the

joy of all. Imagine the celebration at the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus that incredible day so long ago.

I'm quite sure that the prophet Ezekial felt like all three of our "H's" when he looked over the dusty valley of bones. "Can these bones live, you ask me, Lord?" I can almost see his eyes glaze over as he desperately tries to think quickly in a tough spot. His mind might have been racing with **Hapless** thoughts like: "This could only happen to me! Of all the places to be today I have to be here looking at this! Like there's anything I can do!" OR **Helpless** thoughts - searching frantically for the right answer, the right formula, the precedent in Scripture, the way OUT of the question. OR **Hopeless** thoughts with deep sighing "They're just all dead and gone. It's all over".

But Ezekial popped out with the **perfect answer** to the question. The truth. Ezekial said simply "**O Lord God, You know**". Then he prophesied just as he was told. And God's breath, His Spirit, gave life. The dry bones united and grew flesh and lived. A stunning, breathtaking picture of what God would do for the people of Israel. An unforgettable picture of what God does for us. He brings light out of darkness. Hope out of despair. Wholeness out of brokenness. Life out of death. Love out of hatred. He unbinds us from sin, and sets us free.

Jesus told 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 not die forever. Do you believe this?" And Martha says "Yes, I do believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the One coming into the world".

We also believe. We also affirm who Jesus is. We believe in the Resurrection. And sometimes, when we wonder and puzzle over how this can be, our answer, like Ezekial's, is "O Lord God, You know".

In that faith, we rest this day. And tomorrow. And forever. Amen.