



March 9, 2008

Focus scripture
John 11:1–45

Additional scriptures
Ezekiel 37:1–14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6–11

From the depths of our souls, we cry out to you, O God. Be with us in moments of fear and doubt, and steady us in death's presence. Bolster our hearts with your Spirit, that our trust may grow. You are our hope, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Out of the Depths

Doubt and belief abound when death asserts that life and hope have boundaries. This week's readings assure individuals and the community of God's people that the life, hope, and comfort we find in God's care are boundless. Our song, even in the midst of tears, gives witness to such amazing grace and love.

Focus Scripture: John 11:1–45

Martha and Mary are faced with the serious illness, and then the death, of their brother Lazarus. Even while the community supports them in this time of trial, they call to their beloved friend, Jesus, to come and save Lazarus.

While most Bibles call this story "The Raising of Lazarus," the focus of this account is on Jesus preparing the disciples for what is to come. Verses 24–27 form the heart of this story. Martha's confession of faith proclaims Jesus' identity with confidence. Jesus' conversations with Martha, and then Mary, are gospel in both proclamation and consolation. The actual raising of Lazarus in verses 43–44 reads like a footnote at the end of the story.

Lament is received. Hope is offered. Pain is shared. Faith is proclaimed. Prayer is raised. A dead man is summoned. Jesus' compassion restores life to Lazarus's "soul-less" body. (In Jewish thought at the time, it took three days after death for the soul to leave the body, so this is clearly a situation beyond resuscitation.) The community is told to unbind Lazarus from the grave cloths and "let him go" back into the life of the community.

Jesus says that Lazarus's illness is "for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (verse 4). How can illness and death work for the greater glory of God? The text itself does not answer this question. This gospel invites us to journey into the face of death and grief, and see for ourselves whether God can be trusted to make a way out of no way.

The first half of John's gospel is presented as a book of signs. Wine from water, a multitude fed from a handful of bread and fish – none of the signs reveal the whole truth of Jesus as God among us. The raising of Lazarus forms the last of these signs, and comes

at a time when the relationship between "the Jews" (John's term for Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus) and Jesus was nearing its breaking point.

New life also seems impossible in **Ezekiel 37:1–14**. The Spirit of God leads the prophet to what reads like the site of a terrible battle. Bones lay scattered; death appears to have had the final victory here. To those in Ezekiel's time who grieved the separation of exile in Babylon, did the images in this account serve as a metaphor for their own struggle to find renewed life as God's people? When God's people today feel weighed down by separation and death, what hope do we draw from this image? As in the story of Lazarus and in the story of Genesis 1, when God speaks, new life arises. The Spirit (in Hebrew, *ruach* means both "spirit" and "breath") gives life to hope.

Paul, in **Romans 8:6–11**, writes that to live in Christ is not to live in denial of death, but to live with hope in the face of death. We are safe in the hands of God, who breathes into us the same Spirit that breathed life into dry bones. Daily, we are raised to new life. In that hope is our life and peace.

In **Psalm 130**, the psalmist cries out in despair, trusting in a love powerful enough to save. Such hope is also expressed by Martha, Mary, Ezekiel, and Paul. The psalmist's cry for deliverance (life) is their cry, and ours.

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Though we will die, in Christ we will live. The witness of Scripture invites us to trust that there are no endings that stretch beyond God's boundless care and power to redeem. When in your life have you found hope in the steadfast, saving love of God? How might you and your church offer such hope to those who grieve?

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