“Out of the depths” I cry to you, O Lord!... Lord, hear my voice!”... That’s how today’s Psalm begins. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! Lord, hear my voice!”... Raise your hand if you’ve said, or thought, something along those lines this week. Of course, I can’t see you – but, if we’re honest – all of our hands just went up... “The depths” is a term that’s used quite a lot in the Psalms. It refers to the depths of the sea, or the depths of the earth – a place of loss, of death... the depths are a place of grief. So, yeah, right now, when we’re isolated from so many people we love ||| – when the news is filled with stories of overcrowded hospitals,||| a lack of medical supplies,||| and a virus that continues to spread – to spread, next,... maybe – to your house... – your family... – our church family: +++ right now, we all feel like we are calling from “the depths,” from a place of death... pleading with the Lord to “hear our voice.” +++ +++ That’s one reason the Psalms are such a wonderful gift to us. Psalms like this, Psalms of lament, give us a language to lift up our voices when we feel cut off from God – when we are angry at God – and when we are overcome with grief. Lament is a cry of faith – not faithless despair. +++ +++ We learn that we don’t have to shy away from telling the Lord exactly what’s bothering us. God is big enough to handle it. – +++ These Psalms are like talking through problems honestly with your spouse – or your children – or anyone else you love. Even in prayer – speaking up about what’s really on your mind – questioning why you suffer: – Why must you lose family and friends that you love so dearly (especially at a time like this)? Why do feel so distant – so separated – from God, just when you need God the most? +++ – Shaking your fist at God in the face of injustice::: +++ expressing all of this honestly gives you a chance to work through it – to find a new peace – +++ and, hopefully, to come out on the other side with renewed faith – with deeper understanding – +++ and maybe even a reset on the direction your path of life is taking you. +++ +++ Talking to the Lord reminds you why this relationship is so important to you... it turns your heart to the one who can truly help in times like this. +++ That’s what our psalmist realizes today, after complaining about feeling abandoned, he puts on the brakes::: ||| “But... wait a minute... – you’re the one that forgives me – the one who doesn’t keep a record of my sins but instead saves me from them and washes me clean.” ::: “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.” ... If despair makes us feel separated from God – then we will wait – that’s OK::: “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and, in his word I hope;... my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.” Or, as another Psalm laments: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.” +++ +++ +++ The Psalm gives us hope in a desperate time... to remember who God IS to us. It helps you stop... +++ and listen+++ to what the Lord is already saying to you right now – to hear what the Lord is whispering in your heart. +++ Lament helps us know that the Lord never actually went anywhere – it’s WE whose fear, whose grief, whose despair... it’s WE who shut down our connection to the Almighty. +++ Psalms of Lament bring you back from THE DEPTHS, ...from a place of death – places like the numbing, walking, death that we’ve been living these past weeks – the Lord brings you back from there into LIFE, ... reassured that you are a child of God.

This theme of rebirth in the Lord, of rising again after what seems to be total defeat in the face of death – is what today’s readings from Ezekiel and John are all about. The Holy Spirit leads Ezekiel to a valley of bones... Now, these are not bones of the recently departed – no these bones are “very dry...,” they no longer connected... These bones are hopelessly scattered across the valley. These bones, perhaps at the site of a battlefield where Persia routed the armies of Israel, represent the bones of “the whole house of Israel” which has been utterly defeated and, by the time the Psalm was written, carried into Babylonian exile. Jerusalem stands empty and the temple destroyed. The homes and gardens of the Promised Land are untended – and in most of the land the only sound is of the wind and wild animals. +++ Dry Bones. +++ It is a dismal, frightening time... a time when many are dead, more are dying, and the living don’t know if the world can ever be the same again. *** Maybe that sounds familiar to you right about now, in the midst of this pandemic that’s turning our world upside down. Maybe, in your isolation and anxiousness, you feel like you are living in a valley of dry bones. *** It’s a place we all get to from time to time in our lives – it just happens that we’re all there together right now – a whole valley filled with dry bones. +++ That’s why today’s lesson is so important for us right now::: Because, even after all that – when no one could reasonably suggest that Israel would ever rise again – God did not forget them. – And in a truly emotional declaration, mourning the catastrophe that has befallen God’s People, the Lord declares: “I am going to... bring you up from your graves, O my people... I will put my spirit within you, and you... shall... live.” +++ God laments the failure of Israel and so, reknits them... bone to bone, sinew to sinew, until the mighty assembly in the valley has been transformed.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, he also faces a scene of disappointment, grief, and even anger. +++ +++ Now, I know the usual preaching points on this passage are that Christ has power over life, death, and resurrection. It is here that Jesus proclaims, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” Raising Lazarus
from the dead prepares us for the possibility of Easter – Jesus Christ’s ultimate victory over death forever... These are important points at the center of our Christian faith... And it’s all here in this touching narrative about Lazarus and his sisters. +++ But that’s not where the Holy Spirit is directing my attention today... today... with hospitals filling beyond capacity... with doctors and nurses risking the lives of their own families so they can save our families... with life-saving equipment available at only a fraction of the numbers that we need... Today, with truck drivers working overtime to fill empty shelves while cashiers scan purchases, impossibly trying to stay 6 feet away from customers... +++ Today with 3,698 confirmed cases of COVID-19, so far, just in Suffolk County... +++ +++ Today – as I read our gospel lesson – it’s hard for me to understand why Jesus didn’t come sooner – when Lazarus’s family first sent for him. Martha’s not wrong when she complains to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” +++ I think it’s hard for us not to do the same thing right now. “This never would have happened if God had been paying attention,” or “How could a good and loving God ever let something like this happen?” ... “Life would be a lot easier if the Lord would just show up in the nick of time and keep anything bad from ever happening.” +++ +++

But we know from our Scriptures and from history that’s not the way things work, as much as we’d sometimes like it to be so. We are creatures of this physical world, participants in history – a history that has always included terrible wars, famine, cruelty, and yes, disease ... a history also filled with kindness, reformation, peace, faithfulness, and love. +++ +++ We celebrate – and we grieve. +++ When things go well we feel blessed – we are aware of God’s presence (or we allow ourselves to take it for granted without question). +++ But when life seems to crumble beneath our feet – in times of grief and fear, like this – we cry out with Martha: “Where were you when I needed you?” – “Why didn’t you come when I sent for you?” +++ Don’t you see the valley of dry bones that we have become?? +++ +++ +++ OUT OF THE DEPTHS I CRY TO YOU, O LORD!!

And in our lament, we remember that God has been with us all along – taking the journey, walking by our side, sharing in our grief. We see the Lord’s sorrow at Israel’s suffering as their dry bones are lifted up and resurrected in the valley. And now – we see our savior Jesus Christ – absolutely sure that Lazarus will walk again, yet stricken with Mary and Martha’s mortal grief:: Jesus is overcome – and he begins to weep. He opens the tomb with them, still greatly disturbed and weeping – ...he goes inside despite the awful stench – ...and brings life back into their lives. +++ Jesus weeps – honoring our grief even when he knows new life is just around the corner. +++ Jesus weeps – knowing that our pain is real and will not be erased or forgotten, even as our lives are renewed in him. Knowing that the lives of his beloved children always are a balance of joy and grief. +++ Jesus weeps – the living Word of God, in silent tears, honoring our loss for words – giving us space for silence, time for grief, rather than attempts at easy answers with easy words. +++ Jesus weeps – honoring the subtleties of our faith. Grief is not sin. Martha’s anger – like the psalmist’s – gives way to a tender word of faith: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” .... Yet tears still stain his face when he calls Lazarus back to life. +++ Jesus weeps, knowing what the coming weeks will hold for him – a taste of death – a grave like this. Sure of his own eternal destiny, yet weeping, Jesus’ tears show there is no shame in loving life and grieving when it ends. There is no shame in longing for the seashore, feeling wind blow in our faces – and wanting to share it all again with loved ones who have passed. +++ Jesus weeps – and from his sorrow, life is renewed that day. And so in his compassion, his deep love, his strength – you can be certain of your own transition to eternal life – when it’s time to weep for you.

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And so, as your Lenten Wilderness Journey continues amid a world turned upside down – you find another milestone, showing you the way. “Feel the sorrow of this moment. Invite Christ to share it with you. Grief shows no lack of faith. Tears are part of the journey” +++ Next week, we celebrate Christ’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem and then his victory over death. +++ But perhaps – just perhaps – lament must linger a little longer on your lips before you are ready for that last stage of the Journey. Pause to weep as Jesus paused to weep. +++ +++ And out of your lament – feel the wind of the Holy Spirit blowing through this dry valley. +++ Feel the Lord reknitting your bones,... your sinews,... your flesh, +++ and your Spirit even as this pandemic still rages all around you. +++ From the depths, cry out to your Lord – and expect new life in your loving savior Jesus Christ. +++ “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his Word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen