

# **SERMON FOR APRIL 6, 2014–Lent 5**

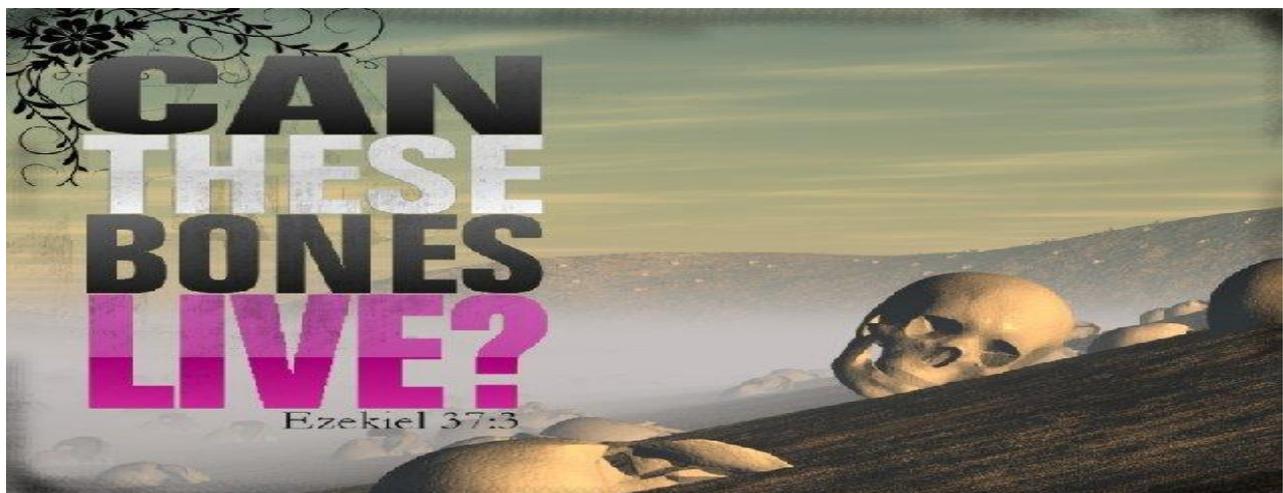
*The First Chinese Church of Christ in Hawai'i UCC*

7:45 & 10:30 Worship Services

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14; **John 11:1-45**

Message: **"Lent 5: Jesus is MESSIAH, the  
RESSURECTION & Life Now!"**

Kekapa P.K. Lee



*God Can Speak Life  
to a Dead Situation*

*John 11:1-45*

# Gathering in the Word

## Hearing the Word

### Ezekiel 37:1-14 (The VOICE Bible)

37 The Eternal had a hold on me, *and I couldn't escape it*. The divine wind of the Eternal One picked me up and set me down in the middle of the valley, but this time it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup> God led me through the bones. There were piles of bones everywhere in the valley—dry bones *left unburied*.

*This oracle may be one of the best known in Ezekiel's prophecy. God's promise of a new heart and a new spirit echoes Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy (Jeremiah 31:31-34). What God's people need more than anything is for God to do a work of grace within them. Like other prophets of his day, Ezekiel is convinced that heaven must intervene in order to fix what is wrong on earth. It is not enough for people to try harder and do better. This work of grace begins with God cleansing his people with fresh water. Idolatry and various sins have made them impure and unclean, so*

*before they can be restored, they must be made pure by the washing of water. Then, once God gives them a new heart, his people will become willing covenant partners; they will give up on their rebellious, hurtful ways and embrace God's designs for their lives. With a new spirit—which seems to be nothing other than God's Spirit living in and among them—they will have the desire and ability to live out God's reasonable demands on them.*

*God insists that all God intends to do to save and redeem his people is not for their good; He is working to restore his good name. God's covenant people have given him a bad reputation among the nations, so God must act in his own interest to make sure his name is given the honor it is due.*

**Eternal One (to Ezekiel):** <sup>3</sup> Son of man, do you think these bones can live?

**Ezekiel:** Eternal Lord, *certainly you know the answer better than I do.*

**Eternal One:** <sup>4-5</sup> *Actually, I do.* Prophecy to these bones. Tell them to listen to what the Eternal Lord says to them: “Dry bones, I will breathe breath into you, and you will come alive. <sup>6</sup> I will attach muscles and tendons to you, cause flesh to grow over them, and cover you with skin. I will breathe breath into you, and you will come alive. *After this happens, you will know that I am the Eternal.*”

**God is not only the Creator of life, but He is also the Restorer of life.**

<sup>7</sup> So I did what God told me to do: I prophesied *to the bones*. As I was speaking, I heard a *loud* noise—a rattling sound—and all the bones began to come together and form complete skeletons. <sup>8</sup> I watched and saw muscles and tendons attach to the bones, flesh

grow over them, and skin wrap itself around the *reforming* bodies. But there was still no breath in them.

**Eternal One:** <sup>9</sup> Prophecy to the breath. Speak, son of man, and tell them what the Eternal Lord has to say: “O *sweet* breath, come from the four winds and breathe into these who have been killed. Make these *corpses* come alive.”

<sup>10</sup> So I did what God told me to do: I prophesied *to the breath*. As I was speaking, breath invaded the lifeless. The bodies came alive and stood on their feet. *I realized then I was looking at a great army.*

**Eternal One:** <sup>11</sup> Son of man, these bones are the entire community of Israel. They keep saying, “Our bones are dry *now*, *picked clean by scavengers*. All hope is gone. Our nation is lost.”

<sup>12-13</sup> He told me to prophesy and tell them what he said.

**Eternal One:** Pay attention, my people! I am going to open your graves *and bring you back to life!* I will carry you *straight* back to the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Eternal One.

<sup>14</sup> I will breathe my Spirit into you, and you will be alive *once again*. I will place you back in your own land. After that you will know I, the Eternal, have done what I said I would do.

So said the Eternal One.

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This prophecy and oracle is the best known in Ezekiel’s prophecy. Ezekiel is convinced that what GOD’s people need more than anything is **for GOD to do a work of grace within the people**. God needs to intervene in order to fix what is wrong on earth. *Once GOD gives them*

*a new heart—says the Prophet—then GOD’s people will become willing covenant partners; they’ll give up their rebellious, hurtful ways and embrace GOD’s designs for their lives!* With a new spirit—which seems nothing other than GOD’s spirit living in and among them—the people will have the desire and ability to live out GOD’s reasonable demands on them!

So Ezekiel preaches the *sermon of the valley of dry bones!* Will GOD return the very breath of life to these bones? GOD is the GOD of resurrection and the life—the Alpha and the Omega, the great shepherd of the sheep and the firstborn of all us dead and dying folk—GOD’s answer to this question is simple, clear, and scented with hope:

**Can these bones live?**

**YES! The Sovereign GOD in Jesus Christ our Lord has spoken it!**

### **John 11:1-45 (The VOICE Bible)**

*John points to stories where Jesus returns to the issue of faith again and again. The crowds are fickle, believing sometimes and not others. The religious leaders refuse to believe because Jesus doesn’t fit their paradigms. The disciples and close friends constantly face situations that challenge their faith, and this*

*especially happens when Lazarus dies. John is implicitly urging his readers to have faith in Christ, even in difficult times, because he is the source of life and well being.*

11 There was a certain man who was very ill. He was known as Lazarus from Bethany, which is the hometown of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> *Mary did a beautiful thing for Jesus. She anointed the Lord with a pleasant-smelling oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus became deathly ill,* <sup>3</sup> *so the sisters immediately sent a message to Jesus which said, “Lord, the one you love is very ill.”* <sup>4</sup> Jesus heard the message.

**Jesus:** His sickness will not end in his death but will bring great glory to God. As these events unfold, the Son of God will be exalted.

<sup>5</sup> Jesus *dearly* loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> However, after receiving this news, he waited two more days where he was.

**Jesus** (*speaking to the disciples*): <sup>7</sup> It is time to return to Judea.

**Disciples:** <sup>8</sup> Teacher, the last time you were there, some Jews attempted to execute you by crushing you with stones. Why would you go back?

**Jesus:** <sup>9</sup> There are 12 hours of daylight, correct? If anyone walks in the day, that person does not stumble because he or she sees the light of the world. <sup>10</sup> If anyone walks at night, he will trip and fall because he does not have the light within. <sup>11</sup> (Jesus briefly pauses.) Our friend Lazarus has gone to sleep, so I will go to awaken him.

**Disciples:** <sup>12</sup> Lord, if he is sleeping, then he will be all right.

<sup>13</sup> Jesus used “sleep” *as a metaphor* for death, but the disciples took him literally *and did not understand*. <sup>14</sup> Then Jesus spoke plainly.

**Jesus:** Lazarus is dead, <sup>15</sup> and I am grateful for your sakes that I was not there when he died. Now you will *see and* believe. Gather yourselves, and let's go to him.

**Thomas, the Twin (to the disciples):** <sup>16</sup> Let's go so we can die with him.

<sup>17-18</sup> As Jesus was approaching Bethany (which is about two miles east of Jerusalem); he heard that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. <sup>19</sup> Now many people had come to comfort Mary and Martha as they mourned the loss of their brother. <sup>20</sup> Martha went to meet Jesus when word arrived that he was approaching Bethany, but Mary stayed behind at the house.

**Martha:** <sup>21</sup> Lord, if you had been with us, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> Even so I still believe that anything you ask of God will be done.

**Jesus:** <sup>23</sup> Your brother will rise to life.

**Martha:** <sup>24</sup> I know. He will rise again when everyone is resurrected on the last day.

**Jesus:** <sup>25</sup> I am the resurrection and the source of all life; those who believe in me will live even in death. <sup>26</sup> Everyone who lives and believes in me will never truly die. Do you believe this?

**Martha:** <sup>27</sup> Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Anointed, *the Liberating King*; God's own Son who *we have heard* is coming into the world.

<sup>28</sup> After this Martha ran home to Mary.

**Martha (whispering to Mary):** Come with me. The Teacher is here, and he has asked for you.

<sup>29</sup> Mary did not waste a minute. She got up and went <sup>30</sup> to the same spot where Martha had found Jesus outside the village.

<sup>31</sup> The people gathered in her home offering support and comfort assumed she was going back to the tomb to cry and mourn, so they followed her. <sup>32</sup> Mary approached Jesus, saw him, and fell at his feet.

**Mary:** Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would still be alive.

<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw Mary's *profound grief and the moaning and weeping* of her companions, He was deeply moved *by their pain* in his spirit and was intensely troubled.

**Jesus:** <sup>34</sup> Where have you laid his body?

**Jews:** Come and see, Lord.

<sup>35</sup> *As they walked*, Jesus wept; <sup>36</sup> and everyone noticed how much Jesus must have loved Lazarus. <sup>37</sup> But others were skeptical.

**Others:** If this man can give sight to the blind, He could have kept him from dying.

**They are asking, if Jesus loves Lazarus so much, why didn't he get here much sooner?**

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, who was intensely troubled by all of this, approached the tomb—a *small cave* covered by a *massive* stone.

**Jesus:** <sup>39</sup> Remove the stone.

**Martha:** Lord, he has been dead four days; the stench will be unbearable.

**Jesus:** <sup>40</sup> Remember, I told you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God.

<sup>41</sup> They removed the stone, and Jesus lifted his eyes toward heaven.

**Jesus:** Father, I am grateful that you have heard Me. <sup>42</sup> I know that you are always listening, but I proclaim it loudly so that everyone here will believe you have sent me.

<sup>43</sup> After these words, he called out in a thunderous voice.

**Jesus:** Lazarus, come out!

<sup>44</sup> Then, the man who was dead walked out of his tomb bound from head to toe in a burial shroud.

**Jesus:** Untie him, and let him go.

*Once again Jesus amazes everyone around him. How does he raise Lazarus? What kind of man can speak life into death's darkness? Throughout his time on earth, those around him are continually surprised by Jesus. He is unique. How does he have power over death? It takes a while, but more and more his followers become convinced this is no ordinary man.*

<sup>45</sup> As a result, many of the Jews who had come with Mary saw what happened and believed in him.

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Death is everywhere and we all have experienced the death of loved ones in our lives—parents, siblings, children, grandchildren; spouses; good friends—and many others! John 11 teaches about death and there's a whiff and smell of death when Jesus at long last arrives in Bethany. You could hear the crying and sobs a long way off. The whooping cries of the professional mourners mixed

with the heaving sobs of Mary, Martha, and the others. Grief is blatant and engulfing! Their brother Lazarus has died!

Jesus encounters the sisters Mary and Martha. "Your brother will rise again," Jesus offers. "Of course he will rise again at the last day *when the roll is called up yonder by and by*—but I'm hurting *this day, Lord!*" Jesus fixes his eyes on Martha with an intense stare and makes a claim so bold . . .

### **"Martha, I Am the resurrection and the life!**

Now today Martha, I AM the roll that's called up yonder and I am now! Do you believe this? With trembling lips and a quivering chin, with tears leaking out from her eyes for the first time since she encountered Jesus that day Martha says, "Yes. Yes . . . I do believe that, because I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of GOD, and the future of the whole universe that has come into the world!"

- ✓ Jesus wept!
- ✓ Jesus weeps not because he doesn't believe his own words!
- ✓ Jesus weeps not because he has forgotten that he'd be having tea and cucumber sandwiches with Lazarus within the hour!

No—Jesus weeps because as the Word of GOD who was with GOD in the beginning and through whom all things were made—Jesus knows more keenly than anyone there that day that this is not the way it's supposed to be!

- ✓ He didn't say "Let there be light" in the beginning to end up with a world so full of darkness and sorrow.
- ✓ Jesus weeps for same reason you cry when you see your kid trying to be brave on the playground even though he's just been taunted, insulted and bullied by some other kid—taunted in such a way that shriveled his little spirit!
- ✓ You weep for your child because you hate to see him diminished because you love him.

So on that day—Jesus does something to take some of the wind out of death's sails. Lazarus will die again. Mary and Martha may still have to go through another funeral for him at some point later. But still Jesus shows that he is on the other side of life by bringing Lazarus back to life! Lazarus emerged, blinking into the Palestine sunshine only to see Jesus standing there in the light. But maybe it looked like heaven because Jesus was there.

GOD's solution was unsurprisingly—rather ingenious and original! Jesus' resurrection on Easter was the future breaking into all our collective pasts! So when Jesus comes up to each of us to ask the same question he asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" we have a new way to answer:

**Yes we do believe in Jesus, we do believe that we *will* rise again one day. We believe it will happen because, in Christ, it already *did* happen! Nothing can prevent the eternal life Jesus offers us because it had already come! On that long ago day in Bethany—Jesus essentially told Martha that the Last Day—the Day of the Lord—the Day of Resurrection was standing right in front of her!**

**The whole point here of John 11 is this: whether we live or die, we are the Lord's because he just *is*, right now the resurrection and the life! That is the BIG meaning for us when the roll is called up yonder by and by! It is here now! It is at the Lord's where each time when we come we quite literally taste and see that the Lord is good, taste and see that new life is here now because as our communion table says to us—*Jesus is here, Jesus is now!* And if by faith you can see**

**Jesus each time in the bread and wine—then you—too—have begun to taste heaven already!**

**Jesus reminds us again and again: “I *am* the resurrection and the life.” Because these words came from our Lord—when we as Christians get asked by people: “Where can we find any hope in this world,” we know have the joyful privilege to proclaim the gospel by boldly declaring, “Where is the hope? *Why—it’s just about everywhere—seeing you asked!*”**

**ALLELUIA! AMEN!**

## **Doing the Word**

So on this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, what is the Word of God for us?

### **1. ONE: WE HAVE GOD’S BREATH OF LIFE IS US!**

- ✓ In our Ezekiel 37 lesson—**ruach**— Hebrew for “breath” pops up 10 times in these verses!
- ✓ Where is the Holy Spirit?

## **2. TWO: JESUS IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE!**

- ✓ This will have enormous meaning when the roll is called up yonder by and by for all of us!
- ✓ Tasting Jesus' life is in the here and now!
- ✓ And if by faith you can see Jesus each time in the bread and the wine of communion—then you, too, have begun to taste heaven already!
- ✓ HOPE is everywhere in Jesus now!
- ✓ So transform your relationships now!
- ✓ GOD's promises are present tense—not just future!

## **3. THREE: WE--THE BODY OF CHRIST ARE TO PARTICIPATE IN GOD'S ACTION, TO MAKE IT HAPPEN, TO BRING IT TO ITS DESIRED END AND OUTCOME—AND TO JOIN IN COMPLETING GOD'S REDEMPTIVE ACT!**

- ✓ Jesus invites the faith community—the sisters and brothers of TFCCCH—to participate—to do something wonderful; something essential and meaningful and important as a community of Jesus!

- ✓ What if we became the heroes of our neighborhood and community by helping each other; the broken; the grieving; the challenged; the abused; the lonely . . .
- ✓ What would happen if we really believed our littlest actions make a difference?

## **Sent in the Word**

So sisters and brothers—young and older—spend a few moments looking at the week ahead of us—both the challenges and the opportunities—and I invite you to think about where you might claim GOD’s resurrection promise and power now—making a difference in someone’s life now—giving themselves to a worthy cause or purpose now.

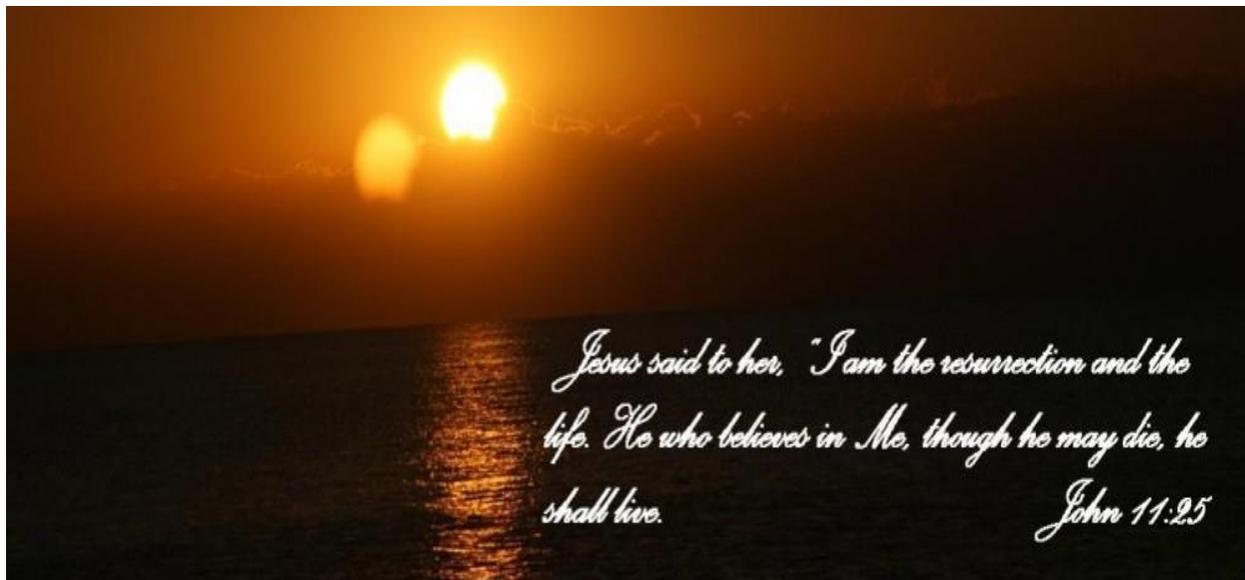
- ✓ It doesn’t have to be huge (though it might be).
- ✓ It doesn’t have to be spectacular (though, who knows, maybe it will).

Opportunities to unbind and let go about! But we need to look out so that we might hear Jesus calling us by name to make a difference to those around us! So whether you write something out; or you to talk with each other! For now I just want to encourage you to invite people to live their promised salvation now! Why? Because Jesus is

the resurrection *and* the life and has promised to give us—not just more life—but life in all its abundance!

### **QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND FEEDBACK:**

1. "When you have felt that God is tarrying? What has helped you hold onto your faith?"
2. "What does it mean to you to know that God weeps with us and for us?"
3. "Where have you seen God act in your life or in the world recently?"
4. "Where do you feel called to unbind and set free? What difference does it make to know that God regards you as a partner and co-creator in God's work to care for neighbor and world?"



## **Prayer for Healing in Depression**

*By Mary Luti (<http://sicutlocutusest.com>)*

*Retired UCC Pastor & Seminary Professor*

Holy One,

I offer you my sadness and lethargy,  
the gray pain of a dull body averse to song,  
affronted by color and flesh.

Like this, without feeling a thing,

I am yours.

Take my life and hold it in your hand  
as one holds a small bird fallen from a nest,  
wounded by wind;

and in your kindness, restore me  
to the heaven of your abiding presence.

Awaken me again to the beauty of earth  
and to thankfulness for my life upon it.

I ask through Christ, my Lord.

Amen.