



## St. Luke's East Hampton

### Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

March 29, 2026; Lent 5A: Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

Let me begin by reviewing a geography lesson that I shared with you in the fall. As you may remember, the ancient Middle East contained two centers of civilization, the first around the Nile in Egypt and the second in the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now Iraq. Connecting these is a narrow strip of land, known today as Israel. This is where the battles between these empires took place. Everyone is now familiar with the choke point in the Persian Gulf at the Straits of Hormuz. The choke point in the land of Israel was at a place known as the Jezreel Valley, a valley that was marked by a mountain named Megiddo. In Hebrew, the word “Har” means mountain. “Har-Megiddo” (or “Armageddon”) was known throughout the ancient world, not as some mythical site for the end of a world but rather as a place where battles had happened, and would happen again and again. (They did. The most recent battle was fought there in World War I.) As an aside, what is true for “Armageddon” is also true for “Gehenna,” the word Jesus uses for hell. When Jesus talked about “the fires of hell,” he was referring to an actual place, a garbage dump outside Jerusalem where refuse was burned. (See <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6558-gehenna>) Like John’s Armageddon in the Book of Revelation, Jesus’ Gehenna in the gospels was a place that his hearers would have known and a metaphor they would have understood as something from their current experience, not as a future prediction of a some sort of Dante-inspired inferno. Like Gehenna, Har Megiddo is an actual place. I have visited Har Megiddo and seen the ruins of an impressive fortress there, said to have been built in the time of Solomon. Archeological evidence suggest that it was an important site even before that, in Canaanite times. In this morning’s reading, Ezekiel finds himself looking out over this valley at the battlefield where in 587 BCE the army of Israel had been utterly destroyed. If you recall photographs of the rubble of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or ruins of bombed out cities in Europe at the end of World War II, you get an idea of what Ezekiel was seeing. If that

does not work, picture the twisted Gothic shapes of metal in the ruins of the trade towers after 9/11. Remember your emotions that day and you will begin to feel what Ezekiel probably felt as he looked out over the Valley of Jezreel. The difference, however, is that the images of Hiroshima and of 9/11 were of destroyed buildings, not people. I knew a chaplain who was sent in to do burials of the victims after 9/11... and did funerals for bone fragments because that's all they could find. At 9/11 there were no bodies. Ezekiel's vision was filled with bodies. It was filled with bones. Ezekiel was looking at the bones of his people: people in whose deaths every hope for his nation, his family, and his future had died. Looking at Ezekiel's anguish, God asks, "Can these bones live?" and, with a great rattling, the bones connected one to another and the question was answered with a resounding yes. In Hebrew, the same word is used for wind, for breath, and for the Spirit of God. In Genesis, God forms Adam out of clay, breathes on him, fills him with his Spirit, and gives him life. In Ezekiel, the winds, the breath, and the Spirit of God came upon those bones, and they came back to life. In the ancient world, bodies were left on a battlefield (and left hanging on crosses) as a warning. Earthly kingdoms use fear of death and demonstrations of lethality to project power. God's kingdom uses the power of love, the hope of resurrection and the demonstrations of life.

Like those bones, there are times when we feel dried out, disconnected from one another, and empty of hope. Like Ezekiel, there are times that we want to cry out to God. Like Jesus – and that famous Indian in a canoe with a tear in his eye – there are times we just want to cry. Like those gathered around Lazarus' tomb, we know this situation stinks but we can't seem to find a way forward. Today's readings tell us that these are moments when God steps in.

The raising of Lazarus is the last of miracles or "signs" that the Gospel of John uses to point to the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the last gospel reading we will hear in church before the triumphal entry at Palm Sunday and the story of the Passion. It is in this place because it prepares us for what is going to happen next. Jesus said to 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 never die." Jesus is telling Martha that even when things look their worst and when it seems like everything she loved and lived for

was taken away, he would take her hand and lead her from death to resurrected life. He asked Martha, “Do you believe this?” Perhaps not even knowing what it meant, Martha said, “Yes.”

This week I met with Rabbi Josh Franklin to plan our upcoming Interfaith Seder. I learned that in Jewish tradition, matzoh - the unleavened bread used at Passover - is called both the “Bread of Affliction” and the “Bread of Freedom.” This reminded me of how for Christians the bread that is broken is also the bread of life. When Lazarus came out of the tomb, Jesus told the people: “Unbind him and let him go.” In that moment, the bread of affliction became the bread of freedom. The bread that was broken became the bread of life. What would our world be like if we truly unbound each other? What would our world be like if we unbound our church?

Ezekiel’s vision of the bones coming together and Jesus’ raising of Lazarus are not just stories that happened in the past. They are happening all around us today. These scriptures don’t promise that wars won’t happen and that we won’t experience death and won’t experience pain. They tell us that these things are not the end. They give us a foreshadowing of the victory of light over darkness, life over death, and hope over despair. They tell us that when things look their worst the Spirit of God will come and with a great rattling, we and our world will be brought back to life. Good Friday will be followed by Easter. New life is possible. It is real. It is happening to others right now and can even happen to you. Ezekiel asked, “Can these bones live?” God’s answer for him – and God’s answer for us – is yes. Just think of what could happen if we followed Jesus’ command to Lazarus’ friends and unbound him and let him go. Just imagine what would happen if we did the same for each other.