

**Ps 130; Ez 37:1-14; Ro 8:6-11; Jn:1-45**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent – Holy Communion**  
**April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017**

Petr Jasek is from Czechoslovakia. He has been working in Sudan with the Voice of the Martyrs ministry for about 16 years. In Nov of 2015, he was traveling with two Sudanese pastors, on a speaking and humanitarian aid trip. When he got to the airport to fly out, he quickly realized that he was not getting through security – that he would not board his flight. He and the two pastors were moved into a detention area.

All his belongings were confiscated. Petr and the two clergy were taken to jail to await sentencing. All three were convicted on false charges of espionage and sentenced to prison terms. The ministry immediately put out a call to prayer for these men. Everything looked bleak, except for their faith in Jesus Christ.

“During his 445 days in prison, Jasek was moved to five different prisons, each worse than the last, he told World Watch Monitor (WWM). In one, his cell mates humiliated and beat him. In another, he was constantly blasted with frigid air. He

ended up losing more than 50 pounds.”  
(*Christianity Today*, 02/17)

When all is lost, we find ourselves in a nightmare landscape – an ancient battle field described by the Prophet Ezekiel. Here are piles of dried bones, the remains of long-forgotten warriors, bleached and scoured by wind and sand. Their cause, their passion, their life is forgotten and irrelevant. In that moment, we have overwhelming evidence that death and destruction are upon us. Hope is swallowed up by despair.

Life can pivot upon a moment of crisis: an accident, a diagnosis, disaster, loss. We gasp for breath. We try to manage our panic. We struggle to stay alive. Ezekiel’s vision is given for a people who have lost heart, dying in their spirit. Exile in a foreign land is a living death. All the Israelites, young men, women, children, are either dead by the sword, or marched off to Babylon in chains. The prophet sees his people wither and become lifeless, like a valley of dry bones. “In our day, from Darfur and the Congo and Zimbabwe to Myanmar and Pakistan and

Iraq, from gang killings and drug wars in the cities to all those places where people lack water, food, covering, shelter and dignity – there is physical suffering and death” (James A Wallace, *Feasting on the Word*, A2, p 127) – but most especially there is spiritual death by poverty, natural disaster and terror. The people are reduced to a state of dry bones. The Lord asks, “Can these bones live?” The prophet very humbly replies, “O Lord God, You know.” We humans understand death as the grim end of every future possibility – a cold and silent reality. One ten-year-old in a refugee camp in Turkey said, “Everyone in Syria is dead or living dead.” In spiritual death, we linger, but all freedom is gone – we are bound and unable to move.

As our Gospel scene opens, the disciples cannot believe their ears when Jesus says, two days after the news of Lazarus’ illness had reached Him, “Let us return to Judea again.” It was common knowledge that the temple authorities were determined to kill Jesus. After some confusing discussion about Lazarus being asleep – and his illness not being fatal – Jesus says plainly, “Lazarus has died.” (v 14) It took about two days

to walk to Judea – to Bethany where Lazarus and his sisters lived. When Jesus met the grieving sisters, Martha and Mary, they each told Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” The women believe in His power to heal. Soon, they, and everyone will believe in His power to restore life to the dead. Lazarus is dead. Jesus already sees Lazarus alive in His mind’s eye. This is the meaning of His statement, “Our friend Lazarus is sleeping...” (v 11)

Jesus asked, “Where have you laid him?” As they set out, Jesus wept. At the tomb, Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” A large, round stone covered the doorway of the tomb. This is the final place, isn’t it? We wind up wrapped in grave clothes, shut into a cold, dark place. Is it really a “final resting place?” Martha, always the practical one, reminds the Lord Jesus that there will be a stench of rotting flesh. Jesus reminds her that if she believes (if you and I believe) we will see the glory of God.

As if in a dress rehearsal of events to come in couple of weeks, Jesus prays a simple prayer of thanks to God. Then, He calls loudly, “Lazarus,

come out!” (v 43) And Lazarus obeys the voice of Jesus. Jesus tells them, “Unbind him, (or loose him). Let him go.” This is a picture, a portrait of the coming freedom of Jesus-followers everywhere. Coming attractions.

It’s a dress rehearsal because Jesus will be cruelly killed, wrapped in grave clothes and laid in a tomb very like Lazarus’ tomb. The blessed Holy Spirit will call the Lord Jesus out – not to a restored worldly life that will meet eventually with death again. No, Christ will rise to eternal life – the firstborn into the kingdom of the New Covenant.

The Apostle Paul guides our thinking on this – The same Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you as you surrender to Him. He is the Lord of Life – our Guide and Comforter.

Petr Jasek, our Christian aid worker, endured many hardships, especially hearing the news that his dad had died while he was in prison. But, when he could get a message out, he proclaimed, “God holds the key to my cell.”

Even as the officials in the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem plot and make a solemn oath to destroy Jesus, He retreats to a town called Ephraim to rest a while. He will return to Bethany six days before the Feast of Passover.

As you and I mark the days remaining until Resurrection Day, think about this: The raising of Lazarus is a sign of what is about to happen. Jesus' friend was called out of death to take up his life again.

Those who believe and trust God are called out of the prison of death – physical death – spiritual death – to live the very life of God. We are freed – even now – to live a life joyfully following this Risen Savior.

Whatever your old battlefield, whatever your jailhouse of trouble and testing – whenever you are asked, “Can these bones live?” remember **God holds the key to my cell** – Jesus is the Way to freedom – by faith and joyful obedience. Amen.