Opening Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, my Lord and my Redeemer. Amen

As we approach the end of Lent and soon will begin Holy Week, we are continually reminded that we are a resurrection people. We are reminded of the words we say at a Memorial Service for a loved one who has died: “I am Resurrection and I am life, says the Lord. Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though they die.”

Imagine, with me, this valley of dry dead bones. Sit back, close your eyes for a moment and envision this valley: hot, dry, nothing but grey lifeless bones. Maybe it is like Death Valley or the Arizona deserts in August. Could there ever be life in these bones again? Have you ever seen anything to compare with this? Have you ever felt like your life might be as lifeless or useless as these dry dead bones?

Ezekiel lived when the Israelites were enslaved by foreign masters in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar lay siege to Jerusalem, destroyed the city and burned Jerusalem’s temple. They had been forcibly removed from their native land into exile, far from their beloved home and accustomed ways, compelled to toil in the service of a conquering nation. Though alive, they felt like they were dead. They were a people without hope. Like a nation of dry bones, they cried out in their misery as all enslaved people must.

This vision takes place within the context of the exile, and we are offered the image of the prophet led by the spirit into the deepest part of a valley, which is full of desiccated bones. Ezekiel is being led by the spirit to and fro and all around this valley. Is this what exile is like, chaos and hopelessness? But, even struggle and crying out has ceased. One can imagine the deep silence of this valley. Into this silence comes a voice that tells Ezekiel to call out to these dry bones to hear the word of the Lord and live. Ezekiel summons the dry bones, and what did he see?

Hit it, Gina! (the preacher invites the congregation to sing Dry Bones with him and the choir)

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones, 
Now hear de word of de Lord.
And the bones begin to rise. The bones were reconnecting; the bodies were being reconstructed; they were resurrected!

The words, of course, come from an old negro spiritual. There can be little wonder why it emerged out of the experience of African Americans in the southern United States. It welled up from the midst of a people trapped in that dark period of our history when slavery still prevailed—when whites stole the labor of captive Africans who as slaves, mostly embraced the Christian religion of their masters.

It is easy to understand why those who had, against their wills, been removed to North America found in the stirring words of Ezekiel great cause for hope—easy to understand how they translated that imagery into a song that could help them walk as human beings in the cotton fields of oppression. They understood, like no others on this continent, the experience of Ezekiel's people. They were singing and praying to become a resurrected people with hope and dignity.

When I picture that valley of death, I can’t help but envision the mudslide in the Stillaguamish Valley, in a place that use to be the community of Oso. Rev. Janet Lloyd is the Vicar at The Church of the Transfiguration in Darrington. Our Diocese is working through Janet as our agent, and the money we donate in support of this disaster is going into her Discretionary Fund to use to directly help the victims. It makes me think, how is Janet preaching these lessons to her congregation? Do they see hope of a new life even after such devastating losses? Also, I just read that there are over 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Lebanon is a country of only 4.5 million people and the U.N is registering 2,500 new refugees each day. What does that valley of displaced people look like in comparison to the dry bones? Where do they find hope for the future?

In John's Gospel, he uses what are called signs, not found in the other Gospel writings, to provide vivid images of how Christ can be active in our lives. The story of Lazarus, while vivid in detail, is no different in essence than the valley of dry bones, or other raisings from the dead in which Jesus restores life. Even so, this text is the last stop before Passover and Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, which we celebrate next Sunday on Palm Sunday. We are clearly moving with John toward Easter and the theme of resurrection. "I am the Resurrection and the Life" is the heart and soul of John’s intent to proclaim Jesus as the source of life, the revelation of the glory of God. The raising of Lazarus is the sign which confirms the Word.

We are called to walk in the footsteps of these texts. Sometimes we are Lazarus, in need of being restored to life. We need to be unbound and freed, as in the conclusion of the Lazarus text. At other times we are the representatives of Christ
who offer the Word of Life. Having received the Word of Life we are thus sent forth to reveal the Word to others. So as we preach the text we do so imagining ourselves on both ends of the death to life encounter. We receive life from Christ and we call forth life in his name as we listen to, speak to, and touch others in need.

I believe that these texts are primarily about quality of life, about that mysterious collaboration and convergence of God’s grace with human trust and hope, which can bring forth a new future. While they indeed point to wholeness of life, and thus can include physical implications, the true spirit of the Lazarus story in John 11 is best reflected in Charles Wesley’s remarkable poetry:

_He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free;_
_His blood can make the foulest clean; His blood availed for me._
_He speaks, and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive;_
_the mournful, broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe._
_Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb, your loosened tongues employ;_
_ye blind, behold your Savior come, and leap, ye lame, for joy._

Just last year, I found myself walking a path leading down into a desolate valley. I let myself be overcome with frustration and disappointment with the Diocese and their apparent lack of support for the TCM community, as well as some personal problems that we were dealing with. This led to anger and this manifested into depression and internal stress that I think brought on my heart attack on Dec. 13.

As we consider the healing stories of the blind, the deaf, the dead, the lepers, and others, there are usually two active components of Jesus’ ministry: Spoken word, and touch. A review of the various healing accounts confirms the presence of word and touch. And there are two silent components: Seeing, and listening. Jesus will either touch or be touched and will speak, such as "Lazarus, come out." Jesus is also listening and looking in order to understand and to be fully present with each of us.

God speaks to Ezekiel in the Valley of the Dry Bones posing the question, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel responds to the question faithfully, making room for the Spirit of God to act in the world. And God chooses Ezekiel to be the agent to bring life into the dry bones through speaking God's life-giving Spirit into them. Ezekiel offers himself to be God's agent in this life-giving work in the world. God chooses us for this work, too. People all around us are like these "very dry" bones, going through the valley of their days without hope. How can we use our word and touch, our seeing and listening, to help others who may be walking down that path to the valley floor?
If we should dare to listen to the voice of Jesus, through others, we shall find that we are quite alive and there is hope. I think I found my relief from Robin and others willing to listen and share their wisdom to help me understand the love that Jesus shares. I think it can be summarized in the Serenity Prayer:

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\text{God, grant me the serenity} \\
\text{To accept the things I cannot change,} \\
\text{Courage to change the things I can,} \\
\text{and wisdom to know the difference.}
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Barbara Brown Taylor says:
"Maybe that is why the lectionary gives us John’s story about Lazarus on the fifth Sunday of Lent. It is a kind of rehearsal for what lies ahead; in which Jesus does for his friend what God will do for him. It is his and our assurance that there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death, which is able to call us out of our stinking tombs into the fullness and sweet mystery of life."

Reflecting on a similar experience with a dying friend, Barbara Brown Taylor says:
“Lord, I believe, but help thou my unbelief, because I still do not want to die. I believe Jesus has power to raise the dead, only I do not want him practicing on me. I want a God who will cut my losses and cushion my failures, a God who will grant me a life free from pain. I want a God who will rescue me from death, who will delete it from the human experience and find another way to operate. What I, what all of us, have instead is a God who resurrects us from the dead, putting an end to it by working through it instead of around it—creating life in the midst of grief, creating love in the midst of loss, creating faith in the midst of despair—resurrecting us from our big and little deaths, showing us by his own example that the only road to Easter morning runs smack through Good Friday.”

"I am resurrection and life," Jesus says to grieving Martha. Not "I will be" but "I am"—right here, right now—resurrection and life for anyone willing to believe that it might just be true.

Remember:
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\text{Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.} \\
\text{Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.} \\
\text{Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.} \\
\text{Now hear de word of de Lord}
\]

Amen.