### **MESSAGE: “Bridging the Distance”**

**Text: John 11:1-45 (Raising Lazarus)**

**Liturgist Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (Valley of Dry Bones)**

***Purpose:* the purpose of this message is to affirm the bridge of ‘community’ in a climate of pandemic, social distancing.**

**Last Sunday, several of our church members gathered for ‘Parking Lot Church.’ Remaining in their cars at prescribed distance, they waved to one another, shouted greetings, and projected words from scripture. I wasn’t able to linger, but I believe they also sang a hymn before returning to their homes. We never value the fellowship assembly of church more than when we cannot gather, but it is remarkable how creative we can be in ‘bridging the distance.’**

**Physical touch and social connection are vital ingredients of human health, and all the more necessary in times of crisis; yet that is precisely what we are counseled to avoid during these days of pandemic. Richard Paine, a beloved member from our 8:15 am service, sustained emergency surgery earlier this week. His family and I longed to visit with him at the hospital, and he longed to visit with us, but we could only do so by telephone. Thank God for prayer by telephone!**

**In our text this morning, we readily identify with Mary and Martha’s feelings of abandonment when Jesus delays his visit to Bethany. They had sent word to Jesus regarding their brother Lazarus’ fragile state, yet the Healer deliberately waited until after the death of his friend to begin the journey to Bethany. Surely he could have come sooner! Surely he could have intervened in a timely way! Why would he delay? I suspect Mary’s reluctance to go out to meet Jesus upon his arrival was her passive aggressive way of letting him know just how upset she was with his belated arrival.**

**Even so, Jesus did eventually arrive, and no one could doubt the sincerity of his own personal grief over the death of his friend. Death divides like nothing else. One popular media grief counselor invites clients to imagine their lost loved one in another room of their home, “You don’t feel terribly sad when you know they are in another room, do you? Why then do you feel terribly sad when they are in another room in the hereafter? They are still around even though you can’t see them.”**

**But the separation feels permanent, and not being able to go to their room for a physical encounter is precisely what fuels the intensity of grief. They feel ‘lost’ to us, and we feel lost without them. Heaping spoonfuls of euphemism will not make it palpable. Pretending there is no divide does not heal the divide. Jesus acknowledges the divide—the separation—and that is why he weeps. “See how much he loved him!” gathered mourners exclaim.**

**As Christians, we grieve the death of a loved one, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Our hope is in the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Our hope is in the One who breathed spirit into the first humans, giving them life. Our hope is in the God who transforms a valley of dry bones into a vital, living force. Our hope is in the Easter God who raised Jesus from the dead. Our hope is in the One who continually offers the gift of eternal life.**

**“Your brother will rise again,” Jesus tells Martha.**

**“I know he will rise in the resurrection at the last day,” she replies, holding on to what faith she can at such a moment.**

**“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus replies, “Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die.” In a word, Jesus says to Martha, “Trust me.” Trust me with the pain that you feel, the questions you have, the worries that keep you awake at night, the uncertainties of tomorrow, the fears of what may or may not happen, the loneliness from which you cannot escape. Trust me to bridge the distance between you and your brother, between you and your sister, between you and God.**

**Following his conversations with Martha, and later, Mary, Jesus stops at the entrance to Lazarus’ tomb. “Remove the stone,” he instructs.**

**Martha protests, “Lord, the smell will be awful! He’s been dead four days.”**

**Jesus replies, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believe, you will see God’s glory?” So they remove the stone and Jesus calls Lazarus from the tomb. The (no longer) dead man emerges, feet bound, hands tied, and face covered with a cloth. “Untie him and let him go,” Jesus commands.**

**The Bible records a handful of miracles in which the dead are raised. Several may be rationalized as resuscitations rather than resurrections, but the raising of Lazarus and later, Jesus are clearly resurrections. With modern scientific skepticism, many dismiss the claims of such a miracle, but there is little doubt that those who bore witness to them believed them, hook, line and sinker. The compelling story of the resurrection of Lazarus prompts many to place their faith in Jesus and alarmed Jewish leaders to seek the death of both Lazarus and Jesus.**

**The protocols of social distancing required of us at this stage of the Coronavirus pandemic cause us to feel isolated and cut off from one another. Even in our own homes, if one in the family tests positive for COVID-19, he or she is isolated from the rest of the household. Everywhere we turn, there is risk of exposure, risk of infection. Risk management is never risk elimination.**

**But God did not tether the gift of miracle to the ancient world. Do you remember Jesus’ words to his disciples just before his arrest? “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” (John 14:12-13, NRSV)**

**Lazarus continues to be raised by people of faith. When nurses, doctors and technicians garb themselves to care for those fighting for life, they raise Lazarus. When first responders risk themselves to help those in crisis, they raise Lazarus. When teachers give lessons and grandparents read stories online to children, they raise Lazarus. When cashiers risk themselves to make sure people have what they need, they raise Lazarus. When supplies and medicine are deposited on our doorstep, those delivering them raise Lazarus.**

**Our checkerboard protocols, designed to safeguard boundaries of exposure, do not dissolve our links of community. Our enduring compassion, as a congregation and as a nation, bridges the distance. We are an Easter people, and though we must revisit the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross, for a season, Son Rise is coming…**