Title: A Hope that Holds Us
11/1 Sermon - All Saints Sunday (Year A)
Rev. Lindsey Odom
First Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-14
Second Reading: John 11:17-27, 32-44

Prayer of Illumination:
Let us pray: Gracious God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, open our hearts to your Word. Remind us of your promises, strengthen our faith, and renew our hope in Jesus Christ, who is both our resurrection, hope, and life. Amen.

Scripture Reading - John 11:17-27, 32-44 (NRSV)
Our second reading comes to us from the Gospel of John, chapter 11, verses 17 through 27 and verses 32 through 44. Let us listen now for God's living Word

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus[a] had already been in the tomb four days. **18** Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, **19** and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. **21** Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22** But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." **23** Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." **24** Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." **25** Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.[b] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, **26** and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" **27** She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,[c] the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." **33** When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. **34** He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." **35** Jesus began to weep. **36** So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" **37** But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" **38** Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. **39** Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." **40** Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" **41** So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." **43** When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" **44** The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."
Leader: This is the Word of the Lord!
People: Thanks be to God!

SERMON:
Imagine standing in the middle of a valley. The ground is dry and dusty, and everywhere you look, there are bones. Not just a few bones, but an entire valley filled with them. No trees, no flowers, no signs of life. Just bones scattered across the ground.

That's where we find the prophet Ezekiel in our Old Testament reading this morning. And as Ezekiel stands in this valley, God asks him a rather unusual question: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Now, I want you to think about that question for a moment. Can something that is completely lifeless ever live again?

Probably not.

I imagine Ezekiel was thinking something similar, but instead of saying no, Ezekiel answers, "O Lord God, only you know." Ezekiel does not pretend to know something he doesn't. He simply acknowledges that what seems impossible to us is possible with God. And then something extraordinary happens.

God tells Ezekiel to speak to the bones. Suddenly, there's a noise. A rattling. The bones begin to move. They come together, bone to bone. Flesh begins to form, and skin covers them. But there's still something missing. They have bodies, but they have no breath. So God commands Ezekiel to call upon the breath, and the breath enters them. And suddenly, where there had been only death, there is life!

But here's something important about this story. These bones represent an entire community of people who believed their future was gone. They represent the people of Israel, who had been taken from their homeland and were living in exile. They had experienced tremendous loss. Their homes, their community, their understanding of the future, all of it had been turned upside down. They even cried out, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost."

And God responds not by telling them to try harder or simply have more faith, but by promising to give them life. In Hebrew, the word used for breath is *ruach*, which means wind or spirit. It refers to God's own Spirit that gives life to the people. They cannot breathe life into themselves. Their restoration begins with God.

When the people of Israel cannot imagine a future, God promises that their story is not finished. And notice that God does not restore just one person, but an entire community. God gathers the scattered bones and brings them together again. God's promise of new

life is also a promise of renewed community, reminding us that we belong to God and to one another.

I think this tells us something important about the life of faith and how God created us to live. We were never created to live in isolation from each other. We were created in and for community, relationships, and belonging. God gathers us into a community where we learn what it means to live as God's people, to care for one another, to pray for one another, and to recognize God's presence through the lives of others.

When I think about my own life of faith, I realize that so much of who I am today is because someone else helped me along the way. There have been so many people who have helped me grow, taught me how to pray and read Scripture, reminded me of the presence of Christ, and encouraged me along the way.

When I was serving at a church in South Carolina, there was a woman named Rosemary. Rosemary was originally from England, and she had been widowed. During my summer internship at the church, she welcomed me into her home and let me live with her. And when I eventually began my first pastoral role at that church and could not find a place to live, Rosemary opened up her home to me again.

Rosemary made room for me in her life, and what began as a place to stay became so much more. She became a grandmother figure in my life. We did just about everything together. We shared stories and laughed together. We talked about Scripture and faith. We knitted together knitting a nativity set and many other things, watched television together, and spent countless hours simply enjoying one another's company. And Rosemary, being from England, had all kinds of things she wanted to teach me. She taught me how to bake bread, how to have a proper tea party, and how to make her famous English shortbread. And I can still picture those ordinary moments together. Rosemary recently passed away, and I miss her greatly. But I think about how much of her life continues to shape mine as she showed me what it looks like to live out the love of Jesus Christ through hospitality, generosity, friendship, and service. She helped shape my understanding of what it means to be part of the church and how we are called to live as disciples of Christ.

And that's one of the gifts of the communion of saints. We don't come to faith alone, and we don't carry our faith alone. God has been at work through generations of faithful people, and their witness continues to shape us long after their earthly lives have ended.

I wonder whether there's someone like Rosemary in your own life. Someone who has helped shape your faith, reminded you of God's love, or shown you what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

[Invite the congregation to turn to a neighbor near them and share]

- **I want you to turn to someone near you and share the name of someone who has helped shape your faith, and maybe one thing that person taught you about faith. It might be something they said, but it might also be something they did. Ready, go!**

[Allow approximately 60–90 seconds for this.]

The stories shared around our sanctuary offer a glimpse of the communion of saints and the many ways God continues to work through the lives of others. On All Saints Sunday, we give thanks for the people through whom we have experienced God's unconditional love and grace, especially those who have gone before us in faith. Some of those people are no longer sitting beside us, and we miss them greatly. We miss their voices, their presence, their joy and encouragement, and the ordinary moments we shared.

But the communion of saints reminds us that our belonging to Christ is not limited by the boundaries of our earthly lives. We belong to a community gathered by God's grace, a community that stretches across generations and is held together by Jesus Christ.

That's one reason why I find our Gospel reading from the Gospel of John so meaningful on All Saints Sunday.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Mary and Martha aren't simply remembering their brother Lazarus. They're grieving him. They're living with the painful reality of his absence. And when Martha sees Jesus, she says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

There is heavy grief in those words. But Jesus does not dismiss her grief. He tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life." When Jesus sees Mary and others weeping, Jesus weeps too. These two simple words, "Jesus wept," in verse 35 are especially meaningful on All Saints Sunday. Because even when we believe in the promise of resurrection, the death of someone we love still leaves a profound absence in our lives. And sometimes, even when we fully trust in God's promises, we still find ourselves asking questions much like Mary and Martha: Why did this happen? Why now? Why did someone we love have to die?

Jesus does not respond to their grief and sorrow by asking them to have more faith or to stop and move on. Instead, he comes alongside them and weeps too.

Jesus knows what he is about to do, and still he cries. His tears remind us that grief is a natural part of the healing process after losing someone. However, grief is not a failure of faith. We can believe wholeheartedly in God's promises and still mourn the loss of those we love. We can find comfort in knowing that even God weeps, and that we are held in God’s abundant love, compassion, and care even during the darkest of days.

The Apostle Paul reminds the early Christians of something similar in his first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). As they grieved the deaths of fellow believers, Paul encouraged them not to grieve as those who have no hope. He was not telling them that they shouldn't grieve. Rather, he was reminding them that their grief could be held within the greater hope of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

And this is the hope we proclaim on All Saints Sunday, not that we will never walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but that God walks with us through it. Not that we will never shed tears, but that God promises a day when every tear will be wiped away.

For the promise of resurrection does not take away the pain of losing someone we love. But it assures us that death does not have the final word. The God who meets us in our grief is the same God who promises to make all things new. Our hope can rest in our God whose love and faithfulness endures beyond death. And it is this same promise of resurrection and life that Jesus proclaims to Martha. A promise that becomes visible as Jesus approaches the tomb where Lazarus has been buried. Standing outside the tomb, Jesus calls out, "Lazarus, come out!"

Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, but the people gathered around him help remove his burial cloths.

And I want us to pay attention to what Jesus says next. He turns to the people gathered around Lazarus and tells them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Jesus has already called Lazarus out of the tomb. He has restored his life. But Lazarus is still wrapped in the burial cloths that bound him. And rather than removing those cloths himself, Jesus calls upon the people gathered around him to participate in this moment of new life.

And I think this provides a beautiful image of what and who the church is called to be. Christ gives life, and the community is called to help unbind him.

We cannot give life as Christ does. But we can help one another live into the hope and new life Christ gives.

We can make room for someone in our lives, walk alongside someone who is grieving, encourage someone who is struggling with their faith, or simply be present for one another. And through these ordinary acts of love and faithfulness, God continues to work in and through us.

When I think about Rosemary, I realize that this is part of what she did for me. Through her hospitality, friendship, and faithfulness, she made room for me to experience God's love, taught me lessons of faith, and helped me live into the plan God had for me.

And I wonder how many people in this sanctuary could tell a similar story about someone who has helped them along the way. Someone who has encouraged them, strengthened their faith, or helped them recognize God's presence in their lives.

That is part of the beautiful calling of the church. We are gathered together by God's grace, sustained by God's Spirit, and called to help one another live into the new life we have been given in Jesus Christ.

And so on this All Saints Sunday, as we remember with gratitude those who have gone before us, we grieve with hope and trust in the faithful promises of God. For God who gathered Israel's scattered bones is the same God who gathers us and holds us together in grace. Christ who called Lazarus out of the tomb is the same Christ who promises us resurrection and life. And the Spirit who breathed life into a valley of dry bones is the same Spirit who continues to sustain the church today.

Because of Jesus Christ, death does not have the final word, and nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.