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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Fifth Sunday of Lent*

*March 26, 2023 – My last Sunday at CLC*

*Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45*

I have to admit something to you today. During the last couple weeks I had been writing my farewell email to you, and last Sunday after I got the phone call from Christ the Servant Lutheran Church that the congregation had voted to extend a call to me, I went home, made a few tweaks to the email, pressed send...and promptly burst into tears. I had definitely been feeling the loss in my gut for several weeks, knowing that it was likely that I would be saying goodbye to you today, but it was when I sent you that email last Sunday afternoon that the floodgates opened, and I couldn't stop crying for a long time.

In today's gospel, and in the shortest verse of the whole Bible, Jesus also wept. Jesus, too, had been feeling a loss in his gut when his friend Lazarus died. The gospel says he was greatly disturbed in spirit. But it was when he asked to see where Lazarus had been laid that the floodgates for Jesus opened. Just like pressing send on my email to you last week made this whole transition real and emotional for me, Jesus got emotional when Lazarus' death sunk in, and when he witnessed others being so clearly moved by his death.

There are a lot of deep feelings and profound expressions in all the readings we heard today:

From Ezekiel: "our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

From Romans: "to set the mind on the flesh is death"

And from John: "Jesus *loved* Martha and her sister and Lazarus"; Thomas said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him"; Martha and Mary both said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had

been here, my brother would not have died"; and at the tomb when Jesus told them to take away the stone, Martha said "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days!"

All those words, all those feelings convey what it's like to live through loss, through change, through fear, through death. But it was after Jesus himself wept, after he cried, that something even more profound happened.

I know that Jesus crying isn't the main storyline in the gospel today, but it strikes me that it was after Jesus cried that he was able to bring about new life, that he was able to resuscitate Lazarus. I say resuscitate because unlike Jesus, Lazarus was not resurrected to live forever. In fact in the very next chapter of John, the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death because so many people were believing in Jesus because he had raised Lazarus from the dead.

But it was after Jesus expressed his grief that he was able to welcome and bring about new life, to call Lazarus out of the tomb, to invite those around Lazarus to unbind him and let him go.

This is the gift of having a savior who is at once human and divine. Jesus teaches us that grief and tears are natural and normal. They are the body's way of getting the feelings around loss, change, fear, and death out of us so that there's room for new life to come about. I just heard from one of you the other day who is going through so much in your life right now that it's been through your tears that you've emptied enough inside to make room for something new to grow – to be reborn yourself.

I feel quite certain that I will have more tears today and this week as I say goodbye to you and pack up my office. I have tears and am sad because this call and you all have been so meaningful to me. I have loved being your pastor for the past almost 12 years. But now God is calling me to something new, and God is calling you to something new, and for me it's only by releasing my tears that I will have space

for this new call, and I will be able to give you space as you move forward with your next pastor.

I met with Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee the other day to sign a covenant that says after I leave Christ Lutheran this Friday, I will refuse any requests for pastoral services by members and friends of the congregation, including baptisms, weddings, funerals, anniversaries, visiting the sick and homebound, and any other activities that could be considered pastoral, unless explicitly invited by the current pastor at their own request.

Bishop Shelley reminded me that even if I continue friendships in the congregation, when we get together, we can't talk about church, and I can't give advice or guidance in any way. The same will be true for Intern Pastor Jory when they leave the congregation on April 30.

There's even sadness around the change of relationship and identity we'll have with each of you. When we're not your pastor or intern pastor, it may be awkward to know how to interact. I name that because, like tears, naming things that are hard or sad gets them out of your body so you don't have to hold on to them. When we speak them into the universe, and into the ears of God, it creates the opportunity to make space for transformation and new life to occur.

Our first reading today from Ezekiel is one of my favorite images in the whole Bible, the story of the dry bones – perhaps it's yours, as well. Ezekiel was a priest from Jerusalem who had been exiled along with thousands and thousands of other Israelites to Babylon. While they were there, God brought Ezekiel to a valley of full of dry, dead bones and told Ezekiel to speak to the bones. The words that Ezekiel prophesied came from God, and they ushered in new life: there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, and sinews and flesh came upon them, and skin covered them, and breath was breathed into them, and they lived.

Just like the gospel that teaches us how important it is to let grief out of our body in tears and words, this text is teaching us it's important to speak into the dry places in life and into the ears of God the desire for new life. Ezekiel's prophecy into those dry places gave hope to an entire people who had been exiled, that they would return from their graves to their own soil. God promised, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live." And they did.

My dear friends in Christ, I pray that you and I both can take guidance and comfort from these texts: to know that it is not only ok but necessary to let out in tears and in words the grief and fear we are holding. To trust that, like Jesus, releasing our tears and words gives space for new life to occur. To know that it's more than appropriate to cry in a sanctuary – a word that means "safe space." And to believe that we can speak into the universe and into God's ear the desire for new life that we need, and to trust that God will put God's spirit in us and we shall live.

As I leave you this week, I pray that you as a congregation always hold on to the hope and promise of resurrection, even now in the middle of Lent. I pray that you trust that the worst thing that can happen is never the last thing that can happen. I pray that you know that dry bones and withered spirits are not your future, either individually or as a congregation. And I pray that you know how beloved you are, by God and by me. Thank you for the privilege of being your pastor, and together may we always trust in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life. Amen.