

Interactive lesson



picture from <https://www.sea-monkeys.com/>

Do you remember Sea Monkeys / know what they are?

Did you ever try to grow them? If so, what happened?

Did they meet your expectations based on the advertising, what you were told?

It would help to understand that Sea Monkeys are actually brine shrimp, tiny creatures that look and act nothing like what the packaging shows.

What did Ezekiel see in the reading today, when he was first plunked in that valley?

What did God tell him to do with them?

What happened?

Were Ezekiel's expectations met?

God does not engage in false or misleading advertising. Do people always understand what God tells them? If not, why not?

God has a very different perspective than we do, resources we do not imagine, and a desire for everyone to thrive. Often the solutions we expect are nothing like what God gives us.

Why do you think God had Ezekiel prophesy to the bones and breath rather than just raising them up in front of him?

Do we have the power to make dead things come back to life?

Where might God restore/renew life in our world today?

How is God calling you to help make that happen?

We cannot stand before God without the grace of Jesus enabling us. As we head into the devastation of Christ's crucifixion, may we all remember to have faith in God's ways and trust in what the Holy Spirit leads us to do.

Gospel lesson

Just prior to today's Gospel reading, Jesus had gone from Jerusalem (where some people in the temple were giving Him a hard time) out across the Jordan to where John the Baptist had done his baptizing. Jesus ministered to the people who came to him there.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/Lumo-Lazarus1/>

John 11:1-45

NRSV

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.

³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,

⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"

⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world.

¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."

¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."

¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right."

¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.

¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead.

¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus 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.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/Lumo-Lazarus2/>

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. 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, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."

²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

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?"



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/Lumo-Lazarus2/>

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."

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The word of God for the people of God

<Hymn "Now the Green Blade Riseth" UMH #311 vv.1,2,4

Message: In the Presence



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/learning-to-live-inside-out/fifth-sunday-in-lent-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/fifth-sunday-in-lent-year-a-graphics>

Please pray with me?

God of life,

as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may be renewed in Your grace and once again

have hope for this world. Amen.

This final week as we are “Learning to Live Inside Out,” we ask, “Who Could Stand?”:

“Here at the end of the Lenten observance (well, almost the end anyway), we have hints of Resurrection. We have “a foretaste of glory divine,” as the hymnist Fanny Crosby says.

As if the Spirit and the lectionary preparers knew that we would need something to help us through the next couple of weeks. As if they knew that without this reminder, we would find it a very hard road as we made our way stumbling behind the Christ who suffers and dies for us.

Let us prepare ourselves for what is to come by remembering what has been and by trusting in the Spirit that gives life, even when all seems lost. Otherwise, who could stand?”



picture from MMMS collection

Well, it warmed up this week. My pretty snow is now mostly melted and washed away; everything is now the dull gray-brown typical of the end of winter. My front lawn looks mostly dead and awful.

It needs raking to clear the last of the fallen

leaves and the debris thrown up by snowplows clearing the road and sidewalk. I will do that once the weather is warmer, for awakening life to have some protection from the cold until the new season is established according to God's plan.

In our sin, we can think whatever situation we are in looks terrible, even hopeless. God has a different perspective. What we see as dead and awful, God sees as a time for renewal. And God invites us to be involved in the process, to enjoy the new season.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/ezekiel-valley/>

Ezekiel saw a valley full of dead, dry bones. Israel was in exile, the kingdom considered dead after the Babylonians conquered and gutted it. The Israelites could not longer stand as an independent people. But God had plans to renew the people in faithful life.

Paul told the Romans, "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." God is the source of all life; we need to seek God lest we be like those dry bones in Ezekiel's valley - devoid of hope. Have faith! God has not given up on you! Because of Christ, we have hope!



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/Lumo-Lazarus2/>

Mary and Martha were desperate, and sent word to Jesus for help even though He had had death threats made against Him. Though He loved them, Jesus was following God's timing and delayed going. The women lost hope for a cure when their brother Lazarus died.

Jesus was not deterred by the death threats, either. We hear the expectations of the disciples in Thomas's statement, that they were all going to be killed if they returned to Judea with Jesus. Jesus was going to reveal to the disciples that He had power even over death, to prepare them for the coming season.

It is a far different mindset, inward versus outward, thinking to preserve what is rather than to grow into possibilities. God works miracles, things we just cannot comprehend, and we can trust in God's ways - especially since, when we try to stand on our own, we typically fall flat on our faces, tripped up by sin.

Jesus wept at Mary and the Jews' mourning distress. He loved them; I have to wonder if He was crying simply because He sorrowed with them, was sad that they were in such emotional pain, or if (in part) it was because they did not have faith that even then God was with them and could help them.

Jesus called to Lazarus, and he came out of the tomb. God has the power to make the dead stand, to bring life out of dead things. But did you notice that Lazarus came out still bound in the graveclothes? Unlike Jesus, Lazarus was still bound to the grave, representing ties of sin.

Jesus told others to unbind him, and let him go – both a literal command to physically untie him, and a command to forgive Lazarus’s sins, for it is sin that binds people to spiritual death. Look at Easter for how Jesus leaves the tomb – the graveclothes left behind, for Jesus was free from sin.



*background picture from
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/purple-crocus-flower-on-green-grass-5712832/>;
photo credit: Nataliya Vaitkevich*

We have preparations to do, for the coming of our Lord. Not just readying for this year’s Easter celebration, but preparing for the new season God has laid before us.

This week, I want you to continue the homework I gave you last week: **try to better see God at work around you, and trust God to guide you.** Do not go after spiritual sea monkeys, fads the world popularizes but leave us disappointed in the end. Seek the promise of new life in Christ and what that can look like today.

Consider where you are clinging to dead old ways, and work on letting them go as you see new ways springing up, borne of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Ask for God's blessing and guidance as we seek our new life in Christ, for who could stand without God's grace? It is only through our Lord and Savior that we can stand and live.