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## *A Rattle of Hope*

**A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener**  
**Lent 5 – Year A**  
**The Third Sunday of Social Distance for the Common Good**

*This is not the way it's supposed to be.* So said a bride recently about her upcoming wedding, a wedding that has now been postponed. So a lot of us have said over the past couple of weeks. *This is not the way it was supposed to be.* The simple joys of hugging a friend, visiting an elderly loved one, having a book club over for supper, going out to see a concert or a play—all of these things no longer pleasurable but dangerous. Proms, ballet recitals, baseball games, Easter egg hunts, graduation trips, and other rites of spring cancelled or postponed. It's only natural to feel sad. Of course, the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic goes beyond the merely disappointing to the truly frightening and tragic: Worries that there won't be enough ventilators to give life-saving oxygen to all who need it. Photographs of coffins lined up by the hundreds in gymnasiums in Italy. *This is not the way it's supposed to be.*

This is not the way it was supposed to be for the Fusco family, a large clan from New Jersey, who, after gathering for one of their regular get togethers earlier this month, lost their matriarch as well as three adult children. This is not the way it was supposed to be for Ron Hill of Sandy Springs, either. Hill, the beloved football coach at Mt. Vernon Presbyterian School, died on March 24 of complications from COVID-19. His relatives had to say goodbye to him from behind a glass wall. This is not the way it's supposed to be.

We are hardly the first people to struggle with such feelings. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” laments Martha in this morning's gospel lesson. In other words, *Hey, Jesus! Where were you? I thought we were friends. After all those times we welcomed you into our house, washed your feet, and gave you dinner, this is what we get? Our beloved brother dead? This is not the way it's supposed to be.*

In today's Old Testament reading, the prophet Ezekiel is called to prophesy to a group of Hebrews grown so weary and so despondent that they appear to him as a valley of dry bones. This is definitely not the way it's supposed to be. The Hebrews are God's chosen people, after all, those who have been selected to inhabit the Promised Land. But now here they are living as exiles in a strange country, among a strange people who have pillaged their Holy City, destroyed their Temple, and slaughtered countless numbers of men, women, and children. Unlike Martha, the Hebrews' despair is so great that they have no energy left to ask *Why?* or *Where are you, God?* And so it is that even God begins to wonder, *Can these bones live?* In other words, *Is there any reason to hope? Can this situation be redeemed? Or will death, despair, and destruction have the final word?*

It's hard to imagine a more poignant question for this time we are facing, this time of lockdown to try to slow the spread of COVID-19. This time of waiting, watching, and wondering when the curve will begin to flatten. This time of calling old friends we haven't spoken to in ages because, well, you never know. This time of stealing into our children's bedrooms late at night to place a hand on their foreheads once more, just to make sure.

We hear of a colleague who has had to say goodbye to her dying brother over the phone and we wonder, *Can these bones live?* We learn about a widowed mother who survived breast cancer only to die of the coronavirus, leaving six children orphaned, and we wonder, *Can these bones live?* We read speculation about what may happen to the millions living in our nation's cramped and ill-equipped prison system and because they, too, are God's beloved children, we ask, *Can these bones live?* We try to remind ourselves that what's really at stake here are human lives, but because we're only human ourselves we can't help but watch the stock market and our bank account and our company, or firm, or school's bottom line and question, *Will I still have a job when this whole thing is all over? Will there still be buyers for the product I sell? Have I saved enough for my*

*retirement?*

*Can these bones live?* In a world in which so many odds seem stacked against us, where scenes straight out of a horror movie are suddenly playing out live on the nightly news, is there reason for hope? Ezekiel surely speaks for all of us when he sighs, “O Lord, God, you alone know.”

God does know, of course, for it is God who is the source of all light and life. Only God can truly revive our fainting and broken spirits. You and I are not ultimately going to be able to save ourselves, not from what really threatens us, the sort of terror that not even a vaccine can relieve. Only God can save us from that. Only God can save us from that, and the great Good News is that God will never, ever, disappoint. In our Old Testament lesson, God’s response to Ezekiel’s despair is immediate and unwavering. God tells him, “Prophesy to these dry bones and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God . . . I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.’” You shall live! God’s response to Ezekiel and the Hebrew people’s crisis is immediate and unwavering. God does not abandon them to their despair. The people’s complete and utter hopelessness does not keep God from acting. Ezekiel, in fact, barely has time to deliver his message of encouragement before, out of the very depths of the earth, from far underneath the rubble of human shame and fear and regret, there comes a rattle. A rattle of life. A rattle of love. A rattle of liberation. It starts out softly, a sound so low, so subtle, most of the Hebrews don’t notice it, but, already, God has begun to act. Slowly, but surely, while the people have been wallowing in defeat unable to focus on anything but their own agony—slowly but surely, God has begun shaking those broken and lifeless bones and sewing them back together, piece by piece by piece.

Already, God has begun to act. While the Hebrew people lie motionless and out of breath, while Lazarus’s corpse is stinking up to high heaven, while the number of coronavirus diagnoses is climbing each hour, while ICUs are filling up as schools, stores, and playgrounds have emptied out, already—already—our God has begun to act. God is at work. Even now, in the midst of our struggle, horror, and confusion, God is making a way out of no way. Even now, God is sounding the rattle of redemption, calling Lazarus and Ezekiel and the people of Italy and of Louisiana and of New York and of Albany and of Atlanta and, indeed, all of us out of the dark silent tombs of fear, loss, and, despair.

This rattle started at the Creation, bringing order and meaning where before there had only been chaos. It rescued slaves from captivity in Egypt, opened a barren woman’s womb, and shook our crucified Lord from the grave. It brought good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed. It made the lame to walk and the blind to see. This rattle goes on today in every dark and desperate corner of this world. No violent shout can silence it, no raging storm can still it, no ravaging disease can stop it. Because of it, you and I can know that we are never alone. Nothing—nothing—in all creation can ever separate us from God’s love. In the hour of terror, there is still cause for hope. Death is not the final word. Neither is cancer or addiction or depression or unemployment or COVID-19. God has already begun to act. And so in this time of trial, we can say with conviction: “The Lord is my strength. I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”

Dear People of God at the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip—People of God throughout God’s beloved creation wherever and however you may find yourselves this day: Take heart. Take heart. Be strong and courageous. Stay home. Stay safe. Do what you can to help others. And keep the faith—keep the faith in the one who has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” Amen.