

Sermon – 03-26-23
Ps 130; Ez 37:1-14; Ro 8:6-11; Jn 11:1-45
5th Sunday in Lent

For a little while, China was allowing Christians – indeed all religions – to teach and preach and meet for worship. But a few years ago, in Dec 2018, there was a sudden crackdown. I believe the Chinese government understands what the amazing growth in the number of Jesus-followers means to the Communist regime.

Pastor Wang Yi is the influential leader of Early Rain Covenant Church in the city of Chengdu, Sichuan province. This is one of the best-known house churches in China. Pastor Wang and his wife, Jian Rong, were arrested and charged with “inciting subversion of state power” and “illegal business operations.” He has since been convicted and sentenced to nine years in prison.

Jiang Rong was released and forbidden to see her husband. Pastor Wang’s parents were picked up by government authorities and forced to be there when their son was sentenced. Two hundred elders and leaders of the Early Rain Covenant Church were also rounded up – harassed, imprisoned and had their property confiscated.

Pastor Wang is part of a group of 116 pastors who issued a statement of belief and protest on Facebook some years ago. Government actions against this bold statement of faith include “...attempts to alter and distort the Christian faith, destruction of crosses on church buildings, violently removing expressions of faith like crosses and Christian symbols on Christians’ homes, forcing and threatening churches to join religious organizations controlled by the government, forcing churches to hang the national flag or to sing secular songs praising the State, banning the children of Christians from entering churches and receiving religious education, and depriving churches and believers of the right to gather freely.” (chinapartnership.org/blog)

These persecutions are an effort to weaken and even destroy the body of Christ in China. When we are attacked so viciously, we find ourselves in a nightmare landscape – like the ancient battlefield described by the Prophet Ezekiel. Here are piles of dried bones, the remains of long-forgotten warriors, bleached and scoured by wind and sand. Their cause and their passion are forgotten. In a moment, we have overwhelming evidence that death and destruction are upon us. Hope is swallowed up by despair. But my soul waits for the Lord.

Life can pivot upon a moment of crisis: an accident, a diagnosis, disaster, loss. We try to manage our panic. We struggle to stay alive. Ezekiel’s vision is given for a people who have lost heart, dying in their spirit.

All the Israelites, men, women, children, are either dead by the sword, or marched off to Babylon in chains after the siege of Jerusalem. The prophet sees his people wither and become lifeless, like a valley of dry bones. In our day, from Idlib to Yemen and Pakistan to Iraq, from gang killings and drug wars in the cities to all those places where people lack water, food, covering, shelter and dignity – there is physical suffering and death – but most especially there is spiritual death. Death by terror. Ancient Judah was reduced to a state of dry bones. The Lord asks, “Can these bones live?” The prophet very humbly replies, “O Lord God You know.” Death seems to be the end of every future possibility – cold and silent. One ten-year-old in a refugee camp in Turkey said, “Everyone in Syria is dead or living dead.” In spiritual death, we linger, but all freedom is gone. My soul waits for the Lord.

Let’s move from the 6th c BC to the 1st c AD. As our Gospel scene opens, the disciples cannot believe their ears when Jesus says, two days after the news of Lazarus’ illness had reached Him, “Let us return to Judea again.” Everybody knew that the temple authorities were determined to kill Jesus. After some discussion, Jesus says plainly, “Lazarus is dead.” (v 14)

When Jesus met the grieving sisters, Martha and Mary, they each told Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” The women believe in His power to heal. Soon, they, and everyone will believe in His power to restore life to the dead. My soul waits for the Lord.

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Jesus asked, “Where have you laid him?” At the tomb, Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” A large, round stone covered the opening of the tomb. This is the end isn’t it? We wind up wrapped in grave clothes, shut into a cold, dark place. Is it really a “final resting place?” Martha, always the practical one, reminds the Lord Jesus that there will be a stench of rotting flesh. Jesus reminds her that if she believes (if you and I believe) we will see the glory of God.

This is a dress rehearsal of events to come in a couple of weeks, Jesus prays a simple prayer of thanks to God. Then, He calls loudly, “Lazarus, come out!” (v 43) Wait for it...Lazarus obeys His voice! Jesus tells them, “Unbind him, let him go.” This is a picture of the ultimate freedom of Jesus-followers everywhere.

Ezekiel saw God’s power to restore life here in the world on that ancient battlefield centuries earlier. Dry bones took on flesh and breathed and stood up alive. It was “coming attractions” for Jesus’ resurrection. Not to natural life, but to supernatural life – eternal life. My soul waits for the Lord.

Jesus will be cruelly murdered, wrapped in grave clothes and laid in a tomb very like Lazarus’ tomb. The blessed Holy Spirit will call the Lord Jesus out – not to a restored worldly life that will eventually end in death. No, Christ will rise to eternal life – the first one born into the kingdom of the New Covenant.

Pastor Wang has not made any plea except his innocence – he has not petitioned the Chinese government for leniency. No, he will teach and preach and pastor inside the prison. Jesus is the key to the door of Pastor Wang’s jail cell. When Pastor Wang was arrested, the church had about five hundred members. Today as many as 2,000 flock to the church in Chengdu.

As you and I mark the days remaining until Resurrection Day, think about this: The vision of restoration given to Ezekiel was a preview of God’s power. The raising of Lazarus is a sign of what is about to happen. Jesus’ friend was called out of death to take up his life again.

We who wait for the Lord are free from the prison of death – physical death – spiritual death – to live the very life of God. We are free to live a life joyfully following our Risen Savior. Jesus is the key to freedom and eternal life. Beloved, wait for the Lord. Amen.