

Orphir and Stenness Church: Service for 29.03.20 (Lent 5A) for distribution.

Good morning.

Wherever you have come from today,
whether you come here regularly, or occasionally,
you are welcome to our worship.
Your presence enriches us in this time of celebration together.

Gathering words:

As we begin the most solemn fortnight of the Christian year, we explore the story of the raising of Lazarus and the effect it had on Martha and Mary. In a moment of quietness, let us let go of the cares and the worries of the past week, and know the presence of God among us.

Christ of our Lenten journey and of the cross, help us to discern the beauty of your face hidden in the world's sorrows. Forgive our neglect of those you would touch with your wounded hands. May we never shy away from pain nor deny the power of joy, but in prayer and in deeds proclaim your death and resurrection, and lead others from despair to hope for your sake. Amen.

Call to Worship

Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life.' Come, Lord Jesus, and be among us, for you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.
Let us worship God:

Opening Hymn: 352 O for a thousand tongues to sing...

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Gracious and loving God,
Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer (Revised)
Gracious and loving God, as in past times, through the Passion of your Son,
you have touched our broken world with grace and healing,
forgiving all our waywardness, lighting all our darkness
and bringing hope of reconciliation and new beginnings,
so we come to you from all the concerns of our lives to find your peace.
We come bringing our sadness and our tears for your comfort,
and our hopes and our dreams that you might make them a reality.
In the knowledge of the Coronavirus pandemic
that threatens the whole world, we bring to you our concerns and our fears
for ourselves, and for all who are important to us,
entrusting them, and ourselves, to your care.
We come seeking to be renewed by your spirit, to have our faith strengthened,
and to hear your life-giving word.
Speak to us that we may know we are on holy ground.
Touch us that we may feel your presence;
inspire our failing faith,
recharge our commitment,
redirect our thoughts and actions
into the way of Christ,
transform us and send us out
to touch others with your love.
We praise you, Lord Jesus,
for blessing us with the promise of hope that no fear or despair can overcome;
for calling us out of the tombs of our past mistakes
into the light of new possibilities;
for breathing life into our weakness and blessing us with fresh strength.
We praise you, now and forever, as in your words we pray together saying:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Hymn: 87 Lord from the depths (PS. 130)

Scripture:

Ezekiel 37:1-14

37 1.The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3.He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' 4.Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5.Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath* to enter you, and you shall live. 6.I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath* in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.'

7. So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8.I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9.Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath:* Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath,* and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' 10.I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.11. Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." 12. Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.'

Hy 595 O breath of life, come sweeping through us (T. 220)

Gospel: John 11:1-45 1. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2. Mary 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 for 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.* 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?'

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 for 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 upwards 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

Message

John tells the story of raising of Lazarus so well that it's almost unnecessary to comment, but there are lots of lessons here.

Martha, Mary, Lazarus are among Jesus' best friends. Lazarus is ill. Notice how often John repeats the fact: Lord, he whom you love is ill. Yet Jesus waits for two days before going. John even tells us "Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was."

Commentators puzzle over why he waited. Maybe the best suggestion is that we never find Jesus being pushed into doing anything. He does things in his own time – in God's time. There's a moral for us here – so often we would like Jesus to do things our way: we must leave him to do them in his way.

Remember too that it was very risky for Jesus to go back to be with Mary and Martha. People had been trying stone him. And Thomas? Thomas gets a bad press – "doubting Thomas" – but here he speaks up: "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

The death and the raising of Lazarus point forward to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

As we continue our journey through Lent towards Easter, we are reminded that, even though we travel through the reality of loss and reversals, defeats and disappointments, there is a power in the world that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death.

So many times in life what seems to be an ending, turns out to be a beginning.

Where we can see only failure, God can open a new door;

Where we feel abandoned, God draws near and we find hope and assurance.

Where we see only death, we can find the power of life.

Lent is a time of preparation for Easter. To appreciate the full impact of the Resurrection we need to remember those times when we have felt no hope, seen no way to go on, or felt we were on our own – like Mary and Martha must have felt when Jesus was not there when they most needed him.

Yet out of their desolation came joy. It is by going through our hurts and our fears that we come to know the truth that God is with us. We've all had to deal with the loss of some of those we love. We will all have more times of despair and sorrow in the future. Recognising these facts opens our hearts and minds to the promise of Easter.

The raising of Lazarus tells us that whatever happens to us in our world, God is greater, and we can trust and believe in him. We will always have reason to hope.

Martha comes out to meet Jesus. She sounds disappointed, reproachful. If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died. Jesus could easily have made lots of excuses, but no – he simply assures Martha that her brother will live again.

She replies: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Martha believes, but she doesn't understand. She thinks that Jesus is talking theology, not making a promise for the present time. Jesus wants her to believe, not in a theory for the future, but in the reality of the resurrection in him – to believe in him.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

These words of hope are spoken today at most memorial and funeral services.

Jesus goes on: "Do you believe this?" Here is a question that we all have to answer. Here is a question about our own, individual relationship with Jesus - whether we believe in him.

John gives us a glimpse of the humanity of Jesus. Everyone is weeping. Jesus is deeply moved, and he too begins to cry. Has lost a dear friend, and he is moved by grief of two other friends, Martha and Mary.

Sometimes there are no words and we can only share our tears.

I read recently of old man whose wife had just died. The lady next door realised that her small boy, all on his own, had gone to visit the old man. When he returned his mother asked him: "What did you say to him?" "I didn't say anything," said the little boy, "I just helped him to cry."

John emphasises the depth of Jesus' feelings. As he approaches grave, Jesus is again deeply disturbed, but he takes the first step in the unexplainable: he asks for the stone to be removed. Martha, the practical one, objects. Her brother has been dead for four days – there's going to be a bad smell. Jesus asks whether she truly believes.

The stone is removed. Jesus prays, then calls Lazarus to come out. Here, for Jesus, the road to Easter reaches a very important turning point. Some of the people there saw what had happened and believed. Others reported him to the opposition, the Pharisees, and the plot to kill him began. We see the power of God to give life, and we also see the risk when that power is displayed.

To find the joy and hope of Easter, we must go through defeats and disappointments. The Bible is full of stories about desperate, hopeless situations transformed with new opportunities filled with promise and new life.

We see:

- Abraham and Sarah, and a promise of God that seemed impossible;
- Ezekiel's vision of the scattered bones of a defeated army coming back to life;
- Nicodemus shaking his head at the idea of being born anew – and later bringing spices for Jesus' body;
- The Samaritan woman at the well, an outcast, finding in Jesus a new life;
- The blind man of last week's lectionary reading being rejected by his own parents and finding new life in Jesus.

Many years ago, in a radio interview, the late Prof. William Barclay was asked about the miracles in the Bible. He defined them as symbols of what God can do today. He used as example Jesus calming Sea of Galilee. He said that, in any storm, Jesus can give confidence and calmness. He stills the storms of our hearts.

When asked how he had come to this way of looking at things, Barclay explained that, some years previously his 21 year-old daughter and her fiancée drowned in a yachting accident. He said God did not stop the accident, but he did still the storm in Barclay's heart, so that somehow he and his family came through that terrible time.

Barclay relates a sad sequel to that story. After the broadcast he received many letters, including an anonymous letter which read:

“Dear Dr. Barclay, I know why God killed your daughter: it was to save her from being corrupted by your heresies.”

I know why God killed your daughter. Accidental destruction of the beautiful and good. Is this the picture of we God we see in Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus?

Barclay's son writes that, many years later, going through father's belongings after his death, he found that letter, still carried in the pocket of a jacket. An anonymous letter, with no possibility of response. Except from God.

Through Lent we move toward the joy of Easter, and the hope of the life eternal through the power of Christ in our lives. This happens for us when the stones of bitterness, disappointment, and sorrow are rolled away and we experience the call to come forth and live, to live life at its fullest.

It happens when we hear Jesus say, "I am resurrection and the life, those who believe in me even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." We hear these words not only at the Holy time of Easter, but in every cemetery filled with sorrow, for then, - only then, do these words really come alive for us.

Late 1880s, A.J. Gossip, the noted Glasgow minister and professor at Trinity College, experienced the death of his young wife. He buried her on Friday, and on the following Sunday he preached a sermon entitled "When Life Falls Apart." In his sermon he said, "When one complains about ankle deep water, what will they do when the swelling streams come upon them? When little troubles

come and we go astray, what will happen when all falls in? I have been in the swelling current, my feet have touched the bottom, and the good news I bring to you is that the bottom is solid, you can survive."

We stand at this point on the road to Easter and we know that-

The world will not have the last word.

We will not have the last word.

But God will have the last word.

These are days of new beginnings.

I ask you: in our lives, can the stones be rolled away, can we come forth to live?

The answer is yes, by the grace of God.

Let us pray. Father, where there are stones blocking our lives and sealing us off from the power of your love and hope, roll them away and let us know of your goodness and grace this day. Amen.
SDG.

Offering Hy: 689 Just as the tide creeps over silver sand

Prayer of Dedication:

Gracious God,

All that we have comes from you. With our offerings of money we offer our lives, believing that your name will be glorified and our faith increased, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God,

Loving God,

For the glories we see around us in this wonderful world, we give you thanks;
for the joy of loving and living, for the gift of life,
precious and vulnerable though it may be,
we give you thanks and praise.

We thank you that we each are precious in your sight.

We thank you for Jesus.

We thank you that through his resurrection
a glorious future awaits us, and that we are born again
into a rich and full life with you here and now.

Help us to use that richness and fullness in your service.

We pray for the world and its peoples.

Especially at this time we pray
for all those who are in any way
affected by Coronavirus Covid-19:

for all who are affected by this devastating disease;

for doctors and nurses and all medical staff;

for all who work to develop means of prevention and cure;

for those keeping themselves in isolation,

and for all who wait and worry.

We pray for all who suffer in body, mind or spirit
that they may find comfort and hope in you.

We pray for those experiencing injustice and persecution,

for those defeated by fear or loss,

for those despairing that their God

will ever come to them.

By your spirit, breathe into them new life,

bringing solace and peace and courage.

We pray that those who govern the nations

may seek justice and peace for all.

Resurrecting God,

we pray for your Church throughout the world.

This Passiontide may we deepen our understanding of Jesus' suffering;

that all may be free to live out their faith

as they would wish;

that in all the world your whole church

may worship you in spirit and in truth.

now and always.

We thank you, loving God,

for the Communion of saints;

for those who have passed through the shadow of death

and sit with you in the place, or the condition,

that we call heaven.

May our memories of them and their faith

inspire and comfort us,

as by your spirit we feel their closeness

through the thin veil that separates us.

For the hope you bring us,

for the joy of knowing that love never ends

but goes on for all eternity,

we give you thanks and praise.

We pray you for those we meet each day,

as in the silence we bring before you those

closest to our hearts, and those

who need a special mention today ...

Pause

Hear all our prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Closing Thought:

Eternal Life: A New Vision

Bishop John Shelby ("Jack") Spong is a retired American bishop of the Episcopal Church, a liberal theologian, religious commentator, and one of America's most popular, and most controversial religious authors and thinkers.

At the beginning of what he says may be his final book, *Eternal Life: A New Vision*, he poses the question:

The Biblical character Job asked: "If a man [or woman] dies, will he [or she] live again?"

Towards the end of the book, he has this to say:

I cannot imagine a life more blessed than mine, so even the chronic signs of age serve to remind me of how wonderful life is.

Finally, to state it as plainly as I know how to do, I believe deeply that this life that I live so passionately is not all there is. This life is not the end of life.

I cannot articulate the content of this concept more than I have done, but I want my readers to know that my convictions, however poorly or weakly described herein, are real and they are convincing to me. The only way I know how to prepare for death is to live in such a way that I enable each day to participate in eternity. I enter the realm of eternity only by embracing the finite. I walk into life's meaning by being open to what lies ahead and beyond. I do believe that love is eternal and I am held in the bonds of love by my family, my friends and countless acquaintances. They are to me windows into eternal life. I embrace them and I embrace eternal life through them.

So I conclude with the question with which this book began. If someone were to pose to me the question that was posed by the mythical character of Job so long ago – “If a man [or woman] dies, will he [or she] live again?” – my answer would be yes, yes, yes! That is as far as words can take me, but that is enough for me. So I end this book by calling to you to live fully, to love wastefully, to be all that you can be and to dedicate yourselves to building a world in which everyone has a better opportunity to do the same. That to me is to be part of God and to do the work of God. That to me is to be a disciple of Jesus. Finally, that to me is the way to prepare for life after death. Shalom.

Closing Hymn: 261 Father eternal ruler of creation.

Sending Out and Blessing.

May you find joy in the tasks of this week, hope in the struggles of this week and, at all times, the assurance of the presence of Christ journeying with you. Amen.

And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you,
now and always. Amen.