**COCU 23A. Lent5A Readings**
The Ezekiel passage, the Gospel story, the Psalm and the Epistle, remind us and future generations that God not only gives life, but restores life - that death will not have the last word, even when all signs of life have been taken away. Additionally, in Year A (‘Year of Matthew), the lectionary assigns John as the Gospel reading for four out of the five Sundays in Lent, supplying interpreters and congregations with Johannine narrative. All the readings begin with a dark period then move to a different conclusion – inspiring life, and starting afresh, looking ahead to the events of Holy Week and Easter. Whether it’s the dry bones taking on life; the Psalmist praising God, who will redeem Israel; Lazarus being raised from the dead; or the journey outlined in Romans, from flesh to spirit. George Burns is quoted as saying, “*Where the world places a period, God introduces a comma.*” Suffering does not have the last word. As we prepare our hearts for the coming journey through Jesus’ passion, we are reminded that death does not have the last word, and that resurrection is promised and experienced in the midst of pain, threat and death.
(*Commentary: Rev Angus Mathieson, Interim Head of Faith Nurture, Church of Scotland)*

**Psalm 130**: A Pilgrim’s Song/A Psalm of Ascent
*This would have been a song of the pilgrim travelling to Jerusalem. All journeys to Jerusalem start from the depths, with Jerusalem set on the hilltop. The Psalms in general, and this one in particular, do not gloss over the difficulties and frustrations of life. The writer is well aware of what it is like to be broken, to be a wounded healer, and to wait through the long watches of the night. Perhaps the challenge to the reader is to see that forgiveness is central to the way that God is known.*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
**But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.**
**I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God’s word I hope;**
**my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning,**
**more than those who watch for the morning.**

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with God is great power to redeem. It is God who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

**Ezekiel 37:1-14** *Ezekiel’s prophesy of restoration: the valley of dry bones will come together and be clothed again in flesh, and the wind/breath/Spirit will blow into them and bring them alive. In this way, God will bring life and restoration to the exiled people.*

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. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 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.” 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. 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. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, 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.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 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.’ Therefore prophesy, 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. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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.

**Romans 8:6-11** *These short verses talk about life in the Spirit, as opposed to life in the flesh, and are typical of Paul setting different ideas in opposition to each other. God’s Spirit, and the spiritual attitude that it nurtures, leads to life, and will enliven us not just in our spirits, but in our bodies as well. The recipients of this letter are a minority, in the capital of the Roman Empire; they would have been living in the poorest accommodation. Against that background, these verses are a wonderful affirmation of, and an orientation to, life. The verses point the reader to an eternal power, available to the believer, in his or her place in time and space. Life in the spirit is not about an ethereal other-worldliness, but is about how we live our lives as physical incarnate bodies. It challenges us about how we use our energy; how we shop; how we care for God’s earth; and how we care for our neighbours. When the Spirit lives in us, our lives become expressions of God’s grace; when we live in the flesh, our lives deny God’s sustaining grace, and suggest that we are lords of our own lives, with no need to take heed of others. Flesh, if you like, is shorthand for a worldly life lived in service of our own needs and desires, rather than the life-giving Spirit which we have through Jesus*
To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law - indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

**John 11:1-45** *Jesus, on hearing of Lazarus’ illness, returns after a short delay, to Judea, risking his own death, in order to raise Lazarus. After proclaiming himself as “the resurrection and the life” he raises Lazarus; many people then believe in him.*

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.
So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” 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.”
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. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”
The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” 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. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”
Then he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.

Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas (the Twin), said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”
When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

She said, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said, “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. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” She went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she went quickly to him.
Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was at the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 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.” Many of the Jews who had come with Mary saw what Jesus did, and believed in him.