Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Hope.** It’s what the prophet Ezekiel and the people of his day needed. It’s what the people of Rome needed. It’s what a mourning Mary and Martha needed. And it’s what we need.

And not just now, in this time of pandemic. Even before this. For there was death before this, and there will be after this. There was sickness and disease before this, and there will be after this. There was financial difficulty and people in need before this, and there will be after this. There was sadness and sorrow, hurt and confusion, uncertainty and fear before this, and there will be after this. Hope is always needed. This current pandemic has magnified this need; and on a global scale. There is no part of the world untouched. But it’s nothing new. Hope is always needed. And the readings we heard today show us where our hope is. Or maybe better to say, **WHO** our hope is.

It is as we just sang in the sermon hymn: *Come now to us, O Lord of Life; bring hope that conquers fear* (LSB #552 v. 1)! And He does.

He did for Ezekiel and the people of Israel in his day. Ezekiel was a prophet when the people of Israel were captives, prisoners of war, exiles from their own land, and living in Babylon. A strange country with a strange culture and a strange language, and with strange gods all around them. And they had to live there for 70 years. We haven’t even been in this situation we’re in for 70 days yet! 70 years. Because of their unfaithfulness to God. They were being disciplined.

And as you can imagine, in such a situation, it is easy to lose hope. To think that God has abandoned you and forgotten about you; changed His mind about you. And so plunge into hopelessness. This is their reality - their *new normal* - and it’s not going to change.

Except it was. God gives a vision to Ezekiel to give the people hope. Hope of new life. For this *Valley of Dry Bones*, He tells Ezekiel, is *the whole house of Israel*. They are dried up and dead. But life was coming for them. God and His Spirit were coming for them. The Word of God would speak to them and the Spirit of God would breathe on them and they would rise to life again! This captivity would go on for a time, but the end
had been decreed, and it would surely come.

But this was not just a vision for them, then, but for us, too. A prophecy of Jesus. He would be a bag of bones hanging from the cross. He would be laid in the dust of death. He would be sealed in a tomb. But His bones would live again. He would be the first born from the dead. The first one out of that valley of death. His resurrection would not be a one off, but the full and final defeat of death, that there be life for all people. And hope. That though we live in a world of sin and death, disease and pandemic, God has not abandoned us or forgotten about us or changed His mind about us. The end has been decreed, and it will surely come. He will come. He will help. He will rescue. **Hope.**

And hope is what the people of Rome needed during Paul’s day as well. Christians living in an unChristian world. Living in a world hostile to Christ and His truth. Christians being persecuted and killed for their faith. There’s some of that happening today as well. If you disagree with the prevailing wisdom of the world and what it says and what it wants, there is a price to pay. And that price may be your life.

It was in Rome. And, maybe some thought, what good is a religion that isn’t going to make your life better and might get you killed? So, Paul says, **don’t set your minds on the things of the flesh**, the things of this world and life. There’s more than this. There’s greater than this. And it’s yours in Christ Jesus. In Him you have life and hope. In Him you can have peace even in fearful, threatening, and uncertain times. For all this world can do is kill you. And it will. Whether by virus, war, accident, or old age. It killed Jesus, too. But it didn’t win, He did. And in Him, **you** win. In Him, you have life. Life that cannot be taken away. Life that lasts through the grave. Life that is eternal. **Hope.**

And then we heard of Mary and Martha. Their brother Lazarus became ill. Maybe he got a virus. And it killed him, even though Jesus had said, **this illness does not lead to death.** But it sure looked like it. And after four days in the tomb it was going to smell like it! But no, Jesus would go on to say, **he is only sleeping. Only Jesus could call death a nap!** But so it is for Him. For us, it is an unconquerable enemy. But so powerful is Jesus’ Word that dead men can hear it and respond to it.

So Jesus doesn’t rush to Bethany as soon as He hears that Lazarus is ill. He knows what He will do. They want Jesus to rush to his side. **We** want Jesus to rush to our side and help us! But there is no panic with Jesus, no frenzy. All is well, whether they - whether we! - know it or not.

When Jesus finally arrives at the outskirts of Bethany, Martha comes out to Him. How grateful she is to have Him there . . . though a few days earlier would have been even better! When there was still hope. **Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.** Lord, **if only** you had been here. **If only** . . .
Still she clings to hope. I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you, she says. She knows that Lazarus will rise on the last day, in the resurrection of all flesh. But she’d really like him back now.

Well here’s the thing, Jesus says: I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Which sounds quite confusing! The dying are living and the living won’t die? Except they do. But they don’t, Jesus says! Not if you have eyes to see. Not if you have faith to believe. Because in Him is only life. In Him, you live even through death. You don’t have to wait until the last day to rise and live, you do so already, in Jesus. Because the resurrection and the life? It’s not a thing, it’s a person. Where Jesus is, there is life.

And then they see how true that is. It only takes three little words: Lazarus, come out! And as in Ezekiel’s vision, and as it will be on the last day, Lazarus does so. In the presence of Jesus, in the presence of the one who created life and is life, death and the grave are forced to submit. The Word of God and the Spirit of God are more powerful than these. And so with these, there is always hope.

Unless your mind is set on the things of this world, like Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders. Then Jesus is not hope but threat. And they plot to kill the one who is life. They plot to kill the one who is their only hope of life. Better that He die than we die, they said. But even better is that He die - and rise! - so that, as Jesus said, we who die will live. So that we have hope at all times and in every circumstance.

And hope is what the world needs now. That this virus will not win. Well, we can absolutely, positively, and certainly say that it will not. And neither will the next one, or the one after that.

And whatever else is haunting you or plaguing you will not win either. A sin that has you in its grip, a broken relationship, a failing memory, an aging body, a drunk driver headed your way, a terrorist arriving on our shores, the next war or missile or cyber attack, cancer, disaster, stock market crash, housing or tech bubble burst, division, persecution, nor anything else in all creation. Whatever is weighing heavy on your mind or burrowing into your heart, Jesus says to those things: come out! That He may reign there, and that you may have hope and peace in Him. The kind that the world cannot give.

So our hope is not in our wisdom, in legislation, in social distancing, or in anything else we come up with. Don’t get me wrong - those things are important. We are to thank God for our leaders and pray for them. We are to use the knowledge and wisdom God has given us. We are to be smart and careful, not foolish and careless. That’s all true. And it’s why we’re here today with less then ten people! But that’s not where our hope lies. We do those things, but place our hope only in Jesus. In His forgiveness of our sins, in His life from the dead, and in His Word and Spirit of hope. That as He spoke life to dead
Lazarus, so He speaks life to us. Life and faith and peace. And it is so. We are His. And as Paul said, *there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*. He will not condemn us or leave us hopeless. He will come to us in our Bethanys, in our cemeteries, in our lowest moments and darkest days, with the light of His life and love.

You know, if our minds are set on the things of this world, we might think this world is coming to an end with this pandemic. So we must save ourselves at all costs. But with our minds set on Christ, as baptized children of God, we *know* this world is coming to an end! We just don’t know when. Maybe soon, maybe not. But we don’t have to save ourselves - Jesus already did that for us. So whatever the next days, weeks, months, years, and centuries bring, we’re good. In Christ. In His life and love. The life and love He showed to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus that day. The life and love He showed in His death and resurrection. And the life and love He will give to us here in His Body and Blood. Life that cannot end and love that will not.

So with His life and love, we’ll repent and be forgiven, and rejoice. We’ll remember that we are baptized, and rejoice. We’ll eat and drink, and rejoice. We’ll love our neighbor and help those in need, and rejoice. And we’ll be careful, and safe, and smart, and wise, and not fear but rejoice. Because as we enter Passiottide today, and know there are but two weeks until Easter, we know our victory has been won. We know that as Lazarus’ tomb was empty, and Jesus’ tomb was - and still is! - empty, so too will ours be. Life won. Jesus won. Lord, you *are* here. So we will not die, but live!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.