

Hope-filled Signs

Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

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The events in John's Gospel text today set the stage for all that is to come in holy week - the arrest, the trial, the cross. The only way out will be through - which is where we're heading. But first we arrive in Bethany at the tomb of Lazarus, where everything will be set in motion.

Throughout John's Gospel Jesus has been performing signs which point to the power of God. These signs are meant to catch our attention and draw us toward life with and in God. They function like road signs, pointing beyond themselves, to bigger, deeper realities.¹ The raising of Lazarus will be the seventh and final sign - and in some ways, the last straw for the authorities.

A little background helps. Of course, raising Lazarus is powerful in its own right. But it's even more of a statement, because that the people who follow Jesus, and the community gathered around Mary and Martha, know this story of the Dry Bones that we heard in our text from Ezekiel. In which God says, "You shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves."²

If that's not enough foreshadowing, Jesus has just declared himself the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep so they may have life, and have it abundantly.³ In this moment at the tomb, Jesus makes good on that declaration, risking his life to save Lazarus' — and setting in motion the backlash that will lead to the cross.⁴

Immediately after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, the religious authorities decide Jesus must be put to death.⁵ With this seventh sign, Jesus opens a grave, revealing his identity as resurrection itself, as life itself, as God's Word made flesh.⁶

As one commentator writes:

For the powers that be, it's too much. This seventh [sign] is too vivid, too clear an evocation of Ezekiel. Surely the people, once they get wind of it, will be stirred and inspired to rise up (indeed, the crowds of Palm Sunday confirm as much). And just as surely, the local authorities reason, Rome will crack down with a vengeance. To protect the people, to preserve the temple, Jesus must be sacrificed.

In a broken, corrupt, upside-down world, even the best intentions can lead to unthinkable consequences. In the name of protecting life, the powers arise to strike down "resurrection" itself.⁷

Friends, when people no longer live in fear and hopelessness they cannot be contained or controlled. Hope and joy are counter-empire, living unafraid topples authoritarianism. People unafraid of death are impossible to keep down. Which is why, once the events in Bethany play

out, the authorities strike back at Jesus. They can't allow people to emerge from fear and live into hope.

As we walk through Hanna Reichel's book this Lenten season, today we are in the fourth and final section: "Go into the world, or Sending." And the core message of this section encourages us to cultivate relationships, shatter the epic loneliness of our times, and live into healthy community.

As we discussed last week, real community depends upon our willingness to trust one another enough to be vulnerable together. This week we add to that. Real community gives us the courage to go out into the world, and cultivate more relationships. To be kind, to risk being a good neighbor - no matter the ideology of the yard signs that may be out front. Being a member of beloved community gives us the strength and confidence to be a good friend to others, and to live no longer for ourselves alone, but for all of God's beloved children.

A difficult but important story:⁸

On Friday, Episcopal News Service interviewed the Rt. Rev. Sean Semple, bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf. His diocese spans from the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea to Yemen on the edge of the Arabian Peninsula. Much of that region is now engulfed by war.

The Rt. Rev. Sean Semple said:

Our diocese has eight countries under attack at the moment. We would really value [your] prayers at this time, and we would like [you] to know there are faithful Anglicans who are maintaining the faith in very difficult circumstances.

Semple told as story of being on a recent Zoom call with the leaders of one of the diocese's congregations. "During the middle of our meeting, there was an audible boom. Basically, they were under attack. Missiles were getting through the air defenses there and were landing nearby." When Semple suggested ending the meeting so the local leaders could focus on their safety, they insisted all would be fine as long as they moved away from windows.

He explained that a similar scenario sometimes plays out at worship services. "People are still coming to church," and if worshipers receive phone alerts about airstrikes during the services, they move toward the center of the worship space until the danger is over. "That's amazing," he said. "There are people in a war zone with missiles raining down, and they're still coming to church."

Understandably, at the same time, residents feel increasing trauma the longer the war drags on and the threat of airstrikes remains on people's minds. As Semple said, "There is, of course, grave concern: How long is this going to continue? Will the defenses hold for much longer? And no one has any clear answers."

Despite that uncertainty, diocesan leaders and congregations are offering practical help to people whose lives have been affected by the war, including those displaced or stranded. Bishop Semple explained - Anglicans are "people of love," and that drives the church's ministry.

He concluded,

We're people of hope. We're doing whatever we can to live out the principles of a society where people of different faiths can, not just tolerate one another, but understand one another and work positively and productively together in society.

Friends, in such a time as this, it's tempting to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by fear, or at least numbed by the relentless waves of difficult news, but take heart. Jesus embodies the resurrection and life, giving to us and all people the one thing the powers of this world can't touch - abundant life with God.

So we can live unafraid, reclaim our life, and hold fast to hope. In the sure and certain knowledge that there is more to this life, that abundant life in God is always ours. We can claim our identity as a child of God, and refuse to be cowed, disheartened, or ground into submission by the powers that be. We can honor our beloved-ness, and that of others. Cultivate relationships, build community that sees past ideology and fear. Shatter loneliness and refused to be isolated.

Beloved Ones, together may we pass on our confidence and hope, and live our faith out loud, particularly in times like these.

A poem, by Jenny Smith, called, "easy"⁹
Rev. Smith writes:

here's the thing

hate is easy
apathy is hot
as taylor says

hopelessness invites
disassociation
rolls out the red carpet

how does one
ride a cresting wave
that's downing us?

when we despair
the practice of joy
feels a lifetime away
what if the thing
just outside our grasp
is the way forward?

it's closer than we think

sometimes we think
there's only one choice
hate or joy

if we lean too far into joy
we're ignoring the evil

but what if
there's another way

firm-footed
rising tall
looking evil right in the eye
seeing it for the coward it is
no running
no hiding
we see the control
the greed
the fear

and

we gently smile

we lean against that
tree on our morning walk

we grin at that butterfly
on the plant outside the window

we dance to a song
that makes us feel good

we pick up the posterboard
and make are for the next protest

we text a friend
to meet up and connect

we put down our phones
and sit with someone we love

not because we're in denial
because we are very much

awake

because we know
the only way forward
is co-creating joy
belonging
and justice

together

¹ Believing Is Seeing: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 5, posted March 17, 2026 saltproject.org

² Ezekiel 37:13

³ John 10:10-11

⁴ Believing Is Seeing: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 5, posted March 17, 2026 saltproject.org

⁵ John 11:53

⁶ Believing Is Seeing: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 5, posted March 17, 2026 saltproject.org

⁷ Believing Is Seeing: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 5, posted March 17, 2026 saltproject.org

⁸ David Paulsen, "Anglicans in Cyprus and the Gulf, caught in Iran war's crossfire, nurture hope in troubled time," posted March 20, 2026, EpiscopalNewsService.org

⁹ Jenny Smith, "easy", gently fierce; poems of faith, rage & holy imagination, published Oct 2025, pp 151-153.