

PASSION SUNDAY / FIFTH LENT, YEAR A
ST MICHAEL'S & ST NICOLAS'S, ABINGDON

22 March 2026



Ezekiel 37.1–14 / Romans 8.6–11 / John 11.1–45

Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved...

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

ONE THING IS CLEAR from this morning's readings: Death is not a good thing as far as God and Jesus are concerned. The Church emphasises this for us as we look toward the weeks ahead, when we look back to Ash Wednesday and forward to Jesus's betrayal, mockery, torture, and crucifixion on Good Friday. Today we observe Passion Sunday — the Sunday from which set our faces to go to Jerusalem with Jesus, to look human cruelty and frailty squarely in the eye, and we bind again our identities to those who endure suffering and injustice, just as Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, endured abuse, torment, and an unjust execution. In our baptism, we die with Jesus in a death like his, dying to the power of malignant corruption, of contemptuous inequity, because we have learned over and over again that heedless power will always, eventually, turn lethal against the innocent. And death is not good.

The lesson from Ezekiel reminds us that although any old human being can *kill*, we cannot *overcome* death on our own. With luck, with proper medical intervention, with the best facilities and funding *and with prayer* we can stave off death, sometimes even reclaim life from the verge of perishing; but we cannot call out to the dry bones of our ancestors, summon them to rise and put on sinews, put on flesh and skin, to draw in

breath and to live again. We have the power to put to death, but not the power to retrieve from death. We have death-dealing evils at our disposal, but we can not muster death-defeating goodness. Whenever someone complains that Christians talk too much about *sin*, **sin**, **SIN**, — I mean, there's no point in arguing with them, is there? — but we talk about sin because we *see* sharply the troubles of this life, and we see how *none* of us can *disentangle ourselves* from the causes and effects of those troubles. We are tested by desire, and we succumb; and desire gives birth to sin, and sin gives birth to death. We live in sin and we die in sin, until the voice of God says to our bare bones, 'I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.'

Desire leads us into sin, since it attaches our aspirations to perishable matters, to what St Paul calls 'the flesh' because our flesh, no matter what we do to it, no matter how comprehensively we try to preserve it, our flesh does not last. Like the neglected apple at the bottom of the fruit bowl, flesh *spoils*, rots, and, ultimately, dies. So St Paul reminds us that all the pretty *things* we desire too will spoil, will wither and die. And as we know from cleaning up the messy residue of spoilt fruit from bowls and baskets, spoiling, rotting, is not a good thing. The *fruits* of our desire don't bring us closer to God, but bind us only ever closer to death; and death is no good thing.

And in the gospel today, Jesus — for reasons that may plausibly perplex us, may even indeed *hurt* us — sits by at a distance while Lazarus *whom he loves*, the *only* human being singled out in the gospel as somebody Jesus loves, suffered a grave illness and died. And when Jesus eventually came to Bethany, to Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, and followed them to the site of Lazarus's tomb, he saw Mary weeping, and her neighbours weeping, and in a couple of verses he himself would weep — but at just this point St John tells us 'he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved'. That's what we read this morning, that's what the learned Bible

translators decided, and they're specially chosen translators and they should know — but the Greek verbs in question at this point aren't the ones that they usually read as 'moved' and 'disturbed'. They're words that our classical lexicons define differently: ἐμβριμάομαι, to snort, to be enraged at something, like a furious horse; and ταρασσω, to trouble, stir up trouble. These look to me to be words inflected with *anger*, so that Jesus — standing at Lazarus's tomb, surrounded by weeping family and friends, Jesus *confronts Death* in the person of a man he loved, and it *angers* him that Death has claimed Lazarus, to the extent that the onlookers say to one another, 'Look how much he loved him!' Jesus encounters Death at Lazarus's tomb, and stepping forward he *reclaims* Lazarus from the grip of mortality: 'Lazarus, come out!'

Lazarus's death was *not a good thing*, and Israel's deaths were *not a good thing*, and your death and my death are *not a good thing*. And next Sunday, and all through Holy Week, we will bewail Jesus's death, which was *not a good thing AT ALL*. All this death and dying displays the effects of grasping desire, of hunger for spoiled food, of thirst for salt water, of our aching longing for what *is not good* for us. The most saintly among us can *restrain* those desires, those all too human cravings for food that does not satisfy; but even Jesus in his humanity could not, did not, would not overcome death altogether. Desire, and sin, and death ultimately lay claim to us all.

But not everyone whom Death claims, can Death *bind*. Not everyone whom Sin has infected, can Sin *poison*. Not everyone whom Desire *haunts*, can Desire *defeat*. Today, Jesus begins to show us what the power that defeats Death looks like. From tomorrow, though, we see suffering and death at work in Jesus, in us; for this is Passiontide, and in order for Death to be defeated, Death must make its full power felt. And that is *not a good thing*.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit —

Amen