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## Margo Williams Homily 3/29

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Margo Williams

Homily, Sunday 3/29

Let us pray: Almighty God, grant that among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found. Amen.

When I was about ten years old, my parents, as an Episcopal clergy couple, opted to take a joint Sabbatical. This turned into an incredible family vacation in addition to a time of deep spiritual formation and reflection, and we spent that whole summer in Europe.

I joke about it now as a grand tour of European cathedrals, which is what it felt like as a ten-year-old.

But even littered with much whining and dragging of feet, that sabbatical remains one of the stand-out learning experiences of my life, and very likely turned me into a history major.

One day, we visited the city of Verdun. It is a small city in northeastern France, and it was the site of the longest battle of WWI.

What I remember of that visit is an endless field of white crosses overseen by a massive, austere building, and that I perceived a feeling of necessary quiet surrounding everything.

The building is called the Douaumont Ossuary, which is to say it is a memorial filled with human bones.

To be specific, it is filled with the bones of over 130,000 unidentified soldiers who died in the Battle of Verdun. They've fitted part of it with windows, so you can see inside; I remember a large room with proper stone tombs, in one instance, but other viewpoints only had great piles of bones of all kinds.

There is no way to distinguish between nationalities or allegiances. There is not even a way to distinguish one skeleton from another.

The ossuary is a great entanglement of bodies; stripped of individual identity as much as they are without sinews and flesh and breath.

We meet Ezekiel in a similar place: the valley of dry bones, an iconic image. Here, the whole house of Israel is stripped down, their hope lost, cut off completely.

I have given you a literal contemporary image to accompany this text.

With a valley of dry bones, or an ossuary of war casualties, in our mind's eye, we might be reminded of our physical completeness and alive-ness. Our skeletons are where they should be, from what I can tell

– but even so, as I speak to you on this amazing virtual platform,

I resonate with the house of Israel in this story.

In quarantine, and in these times of great uncertainty, we feel lost, at the mercy of news and decisions provided by those in power;

we feel cut off, stripped of our normal environments, and communities, and ways of being in the world. We are surrounded by death

– death from disease, the death of routines, and some deaths of the self.

As a senior in college, I find myself grappling with many endings that came too soon, and a big question: as I am removed from my physical and relational home of the last four years, what parts of myself will stay?

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Likewise, we meet Mary and Martha in their grieving, and we meet Lazarus in the tomb.

The sisters' grief is comforting in its accessibility. As faithful followers of Jesus, Mary and Martha are fully aware that Lazarus will rise again on the resurrection day, and they say so – but in their interactions with Jesus, we see that this knowledge does not totally ease the burden of grief, the loss of the physical person.

Even Jesus, as John explains it, is greatly disturbed. Jesus weeps.

What do we make of this?

In John's Gospel, I feel tension between a completely divine Jesus, who knows exactly what he's doing all of the time, and the Jesus that feels more human, who feels the loss of his friend all the same.

Jesus performs a miracle and reifies his power in the eyes of his friends and theirs.

But I like to think Lazarus is more than a miracle to Jesus.

The texts remind us that we are filled with the breath of God, and that we are alive through Jesus in our promise of eternal life through the resurrection.

In our present, earthly lives, we know that this era of fear and precariousness will pass.

But even as they deliver messages about the spirit, these readings are very fleshy.

Presence matters, and it hurts to be away.

As we look to the future and the promise of the risen Christ, it is right and good to feel the separation as much as we know we remain connected through our love for each other and the love of Jesus.

Removed from our places of study and worship, we remain the Church.

How can we listen for God from the valley and the tomb? How do we answer Jesus' call, when we struggle to feel certain of a joyful return to a semblance of normalcy? Listening is an active process, and sometimes it is slow. Usually, it is an act of adaptation and making space.

For now, I'd like to start with an invitation to a deep, filling breath.