

**“Can These Bones Live”**

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

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.

2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

3 He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” 4 Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to

them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. 5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 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.”

7 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. 8 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.

9 Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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.” 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 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.’ 12 Therefore prophecy, 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. 13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

14 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.

## THE VALLEY

The Lord led Ezekiel into the valley of the dry bones.  
The setting gives an overwhelming sense of emptiness, loneliness and sadness.

And to emphasize that point the Spirit of the Lord takes Ezekiel on a tour of this cemetery.

The Lord led Ezekiel all around that valley.

And everywhere the prophet went the story was the same.

The valley was filled with bones.

And the bones that had been there for a very long time because they were very dry.

Some of you may have had the opportunity to visit a national cemetery.

Row after row of headstones line the valley.

You are grateful for the sacrifice made by those who rest in peace.

But, you also feel deeply saddened.

Who were these people who gave so much?

Who did they leave behind?

The valley is a sacred place and a place of mourning for what might have been.

## PREACHING TO DRY BONES

And it was in this valley that the Lord asks the prophet an unusual question, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

This passage is about resurrection.

Can God raise the dead?

Can God breath new life into bones that are dry?

Ezekiel replied, "Lord, only you know the answer" to that."

And so the Lord gave Ezekiel an unusual task.  
The Lord told Ezekiel,  
“Preach to these bones.  
Tell these bones that this is the word of the Lord.

Tell them,  
“The Lord is going to make you live again.  
The Lord is going to put you back together.  
He’s going to replace your muscles and your skin.

And then the Lord is going to breath life back into you .... just like He did at creation.””

The prophet began to preach as he was told.  
And God began to act.

The dry bones that were scattered on the desert floor came together.  
The new creation had begun.

But, one thing more was required ... the breath of life.  
The Lord told Ezekiel,

“Ask the breath of life to come into these people who have been killed,  
and they shall live.”

Once again Ezekiel did as he was told.  
And the place was transformed.

This was no longer the valley of the dry bones.  
This was the birthplace of something new.

Life replaced death ... people as far as the eye could see ... a vast multi-  
tude.

## THE MEANING OF THE VISION

What was the meaning of this dramatic vision?  
What lesson did the Lord want to teach the prophet?  
This was a prophecy of hope for the nation of Israel.

When Ezekiel saw his vision, God’s people were in captivity in Babylon.

Their army had been destroyed.  
 The Temple had been destroyed.  
 And the few who remained alive were taken in captivity to Babylon.

Truly those few who were left alive lived in the valley of dry bones.  
 By the waters of Babylon they hung up their harps and refused to sing.  
 (Psalm 137)

According to our passage the captive Israelites said,

“Our bones are dried up.  
 Our hope is lost.  
 We are completely cut off.”

We would say,  
 “We’re all alone.  
 We’re as good as dead.  
 No one can help us now.”

You would be hard pressed to argue with that sentiment when it came to Israel.

Toward the end of the Babylonian captivity, God’s people were not only losing hope; they were also losing their identity as a people.

Their children were speaking the language of the enemy.  
 And many decided to just adopt the ways of the Babylonians.

You can understand why they felt this way.  
 We would be like them if we were in similar circumstances.

God’s people were no longer in the Promised Land.  
 They no longer had a king or priests or a Temple.

Maybe they should just learn to be satisfied with their lot in life. Maybe they should just accept reality and live out their life in the valley of the dry bones.

## NEW LIFE FOR GOD’S PEOPLE

Earlier in his career God called Ezekiel to deliver a bold message of judgment.

Now in the latter part of his ministry God calls Ezekiel to deliver a bold message of salvation.

God is going to raise the dead.

God is going to bring His people back from captivity.

How do you think Ezekiel's bizarre vision was received by a captive people?

I suspect that wondered what the prophet was smoking!

They always wondered if he was crazy.

Now they knew it was true.

Who ever heard of the dead rising from the grave?

And who could believe that the Babylonians would ever allow God's people to return to the Promised Land?

No one would have ever paid much attention to this crazy old prophet except for one thing.

Part of his prophesy came true.

The Babylonian empire fell to the Persians.

And the very next year God's people were allowed to return to the Promised Land.

No one could have predicted that.

It was as if the graves had opened up and the dead had come back to life.

And the people said,

"Perhaps old Ezekiel wasn't as crazy as we thought he was."

## PREACHING TO THE DEAD TODAY

This is the last Sunday in Lent.

Next week will be Palm Sunday.

And the week after that will be Easter.

It's appropriate that we read Ezekiel's prophesy on this day.

It's like we're getting a preview of a coming attractions.

I think this radical vision of new life is still an important Word for us today.

Make no mistake.

We live in the valley of dry bones.

We live in a place where hope is in short supply.  
We live in a place where cynicism reigns supreme.

We live in a place filled with death and destruction.

And if you want to preach good news?  
You may as well be preaching to the dead!

But, God tells us to go ahead and preach to those dry bones.  
God tells us that His Word has the power to create and lift up.  
God tells us that His Word can put dry bones together and give them life.

We don't preach good news because we think that everyone will come to their senses and just decide one day to get along.

We preach good news because we believe in the salvation of the Lord.

We believe that people who live in Exile can one day come home again.

## WHERE THERE'S HOPE THERE'S LIFE

Sometimes when a loved one is very ill, folks will try to comfort us by saying,  
"Well, where there's life there's hope."

But, today's lesson takes that saying and turns it around.  
Ezekiel's vision teaches us "where there's hope there's life."

We're not talking about just any hope.  
We're not talking about wishful thinking.  
We're talking about the promises of God.

When God speaks Creation listens.  
When God speaks even old dried up bones come together.  
Even the dead are raised.

## LAZARUS

The New Testament lesson for today is the story of the raising of Lazarus.

In that story, Lazarus had been in the grave for four days by the time Jesus arrived.

So, when Jesus asked them to roll away the stone from in front of the grave, Lazarus' sister, Martha, suggested that this might not be such a good idea.

“Lord, he’s been in the tomb four days, and the stench of death is overwhelming.”

But, Jesus insisted that the stone be rolled away.  
And then like the prophet Ezekiel, Jesus preached to the dead.

“Lazarus, come out.”

And instead of the stench of death, there came from that tomb a new creation.

No doubt people remembered Ezekiel’s vision.  
And now they were seeing it fulfilled up close and personal.

Resurrection was a trending topic in those days.  
And Jesus’ Twitter account got a lot more followers.

## FAKE NEWS AND HOLY WEEK

But, the trolls in the Temple and the Palace were not pleased.  
Jesus’ popularity was posing a threat to their rule  
So they made plans to hack Jesus’ account.

What’s all this talk about resurrection after four days?

It doesn’t pass the “smell” test.  
Fake news.

When we get to Holy Week we’ll see that the Temple and the Palace have succeeded in turning good news into bad news. They plan to kill Jesus, and they also plan to kill Lazarus as well.

Instead of a message about resurrection, they have made it a question of political survival.

The Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem was dangerous.  
Jesus was acting too much like a Messiah for their liking.

And so the leaders argued this way,

“If we say that a king is going to take Caesar’s place, the Roman government is going to come down on us like a ton of bricks.  
For the sake of our nation, we have to choose despair over hope.”

And the people bought that argument.  
When Pilate asked whether Jesus or Barabbas should be released the crowd did not have a doubt.

They shouted, “Give us Barabbas.”

It looked like political expediency had won the day.  
Those who preach to the dead are dangerous.  
Those who proclaim hope in the valley of the dry bones are crazy.

As the high priest put it,  
“Sometimes it’s better for one person to die for the people than have the whole country destroyed.”

## AN ACCIDENTAL PROPHET

Of course the high priest was in this case an accidental prophet.  
Not only was Jesus dying for his people.  
He was dying for the whole world.

And when Jesus was raised, thousands of his disciples were called to preach to the dead.  
Even those who used to be scared of their own shadow, boldly proclaimed the message of resurrection in the halls of power.

And many who were as good as dead in their life of sin were raised to new life.  
Those who were nobodies became somebody.  
Those who had no hope were given a vision of eternity.

Here’s the main point.  
The story isn’t not over until God says that the story is over.

And so we preach hope.  
We preach hope for new life in the valley of the dry bones.



We don't preach because we trust in what we can do.

We preach because we believe the Word of God has a life of it's own.

The Word of God has the power to create a new heaven and a new earth.  
The Word of God can bring captives home from Exile.

The Word of God can even raise the dead.

Today in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we act out this vision of new life.

First, we hear the Word of the Lord.

And then in the sacrament we catch a vision of what that Word can do.

Body broken and blood shed are transformed into signs of salvation.  
And even death, the final enemy succumbs to the power of God's Savior.

### CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

The Lord asked the prophet,  
"Can these bones live?"

And the prophet answered, "O Lord, God you know."

The prophet was willing to wait on the Lord to answer that question.  
Even in the valley of the dry bones he had faith.  
He believed that even death was not too strong for the Lord of life.

And so the Lord asks us the same question today,  
"Can these bones live?"

When we are in the valley of the dry bones we are tempted to answer that question with a resounding "no". We say that nothing can help in the valley.

But, that's making a decision that is above our pay grade.  
The Lord of creation rules.  
Even in the valley of the dry bones the Lord God rules.

"Can these bones live?"  
God knows.

But, in the meantime there is something that we can do.

We can preach the good news of God's Word.  
And, through the power of the Spirit,  
sometimes even the deadest congregation can come back to life.

The work of the life giving Spirit reminds me of a lively anthem our choir sang a while back.

"There is joy in the house. We have been set free."  
"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there's a river of joy!"

Can these old dried up bones can live?  
Is there any hope in a pessimistic world filled with death and destruction?

The prophet points us to a river of joy in the desert.

Once it was a valley of dry bones.  
But, now that valley has been transformed by the Spirit of the Lord.

The valley is no longer filled with death and destruction.

Instead, a vast multitude now stand on their feet.  
Let us rise and proclaim the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Amen.