

"Can These Bones Live?"
Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14
Makemie Presbyterian Church
August 30, 2009

¹The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord & set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley & they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones & say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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."

⁷So 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. ⁸I 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.

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

¹¹Then 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.’ ¹²Therefore 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. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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.

This ends the reading.

A woman walked into my office late one hot afternoon wanting to talk to a pastor. She said that she was worried about her spiritual life.

She was a college graduate that had worked for the same company for twelve years. She started working at minimum wage. Each year her responsibilities at the job increased. Each year she asked for a raise. And each year she was denied a raise. Her salary increased only as minimum wage increased. Her parents said, "Don't worry, daughter. Be grateful that you have a job. Work hard. Work honestly. You'll reap the harvest."

She believed that for the first ten years. Then she became discouraged. In time the company changed management & she was part of the group that was laid off. Two years later, she's still looking for work. And now she is also the sole caretaker for her aging parents.

She said that she didn't think God was hearing her prayers. She thought she was doing something wrong. She asked, "Is there a way to pray that maybe I haven't tried?" Her friends tell her that if she prays hard enough her prayers will be answered & she'll live in the joy of the Lord. She said that she has tried to smile & be happy, but she doesn't feel very happy. Her friends say that she will receive her rewards in heaven.

Then she said to me:

"If this faith stuff doesn't have something to do with receiving on this side of life, then I'm not interested.

"If it doesn't have something to do with some justice on this side of life, then I'm not interested.

"If it doesn't have something to do with some peace on this side of life, then count me out."

Then she concluded her story by asking: "Just where is God anyway? If I could just see some evidence, maybe I could believe. Is God too busy for the likes of me?"

Today's word is for us; and for anybody else who has felt doubt, despair & abandonment. God has a word for us.

If you've ever stood at the grave side of someone you loved & watched as their coffin was lowered into the ground & been unable to exclaim, "Death is swallowed up in victory," then you have an understanding of how those first disciples felt with the death of Jesus.

This word is for you who are despairing disciples:

- who have been broken by a vision;
- or for those of you who have worked hard to keep family & work together & find that you are standing on sinking sand;
- for those of you who have worked to keep love & justice embracing, & found the mushrooming of more enemies....and more violence;
- for those of you who have given your lives to causes & programs & institutions that have run full speed in the opposite direction of your efforts;

If we are honest, surely we have to admit that there are days when we can't follow the biblical admonition to give account of the hope that is within us.

Some days our accounts have run dry. There is no hope left & we are ready to declare bankruptcy. Despair, cynicism, anger, depression sneak up on us, knock on our door & demand to be let into our inner-chambers.

There are times when hope's door just isn't strong enough. Sometimes, we despair.

A long time ago, God saw the people Israel who despaired. It was during the time when the prophet Ezekiel was the shepherd of a flock of defeated people. He was the pastor-prophet to a congregation forced into exile in Babylon. They were not where they wanted to be. So they lived with

a sadness that ran down to their bones. And they refused to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land.

Hear the song the people were chanting:

Our bones are dried up.

Our hope is lost.

We are clean cut off.

Ezekiel preached to a beaten-down people. And often when people's lives have been interrupted by a great tragedy, they will stop coming to worship. I used to think this was because they were grieving the loss of a loved one, job or health. But I've discovered that more often the reason people stop worshipping is that they lose their vision of God. To stand in worship beside so many who sing praise to the Lord just creates too much contradiction. In the times we most need to worship, we find it most difficult.

As the preacher, Ezekiel's concern wasn't with job security or getting a book of the Bible named for him. His concern was in prying open the worried hands of the people long enough to receive God's hope & new life. Ezekiel worried that his dramatic techniques were not getting the attention of the people. He started thinking it was all up to him.

But then, one day God plopped Ezekiel down in the middle of a valley of bones -- dried up bones.

This time, God despaired.

God took a good look at God's people & saw dried up hopes & dried up dreams & dried up congregations & dried up programs.

And God said: "Can these bones live?"

Ezekiel didn't respond to God by pointing out all the good things that were happening in spite of dried up bones. Ezekiel didn't respond to God by putting on a happy face, shoring up a positive mental attitude & looking on the bright side. Ezekiel had the wisdom & humility to respond to God's question of, "Can these bones live?" with, "I don't know. I don't know. Only you know, God."

The only hope we have, my friends, is in a God who can breathe life into our dried up bones.

There are griefs we bear & sorrows we share & one of the ways we suffer through them is by flowing on a river of tears. But at the center of our faith is a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, who weeps with us. The resurrection came to people who were weeping, people who were at the end of their rope. The resurrection came to people who were shaking their heads and saying, "I don't know. I just don't know."

Here at the end of summer with this passage of a people desperate for hope, I feel the need to cast an eye at Easter. The first resurrection didn't come to people of privilege. The resurrection came to people who were at the end of their rope, people who were devastated with no hope for the restored kingdom that they longed for, with no hope for pulling any meaning out of their foreign rule.

Resurrection happened, not with trumpet sounds, Easter lilies, budding trees & a great burst of sunlight, but it came in the early morning mist, while it was still too dark to see clearly, through weeping & weariness, through fear & confusion, through the disorientation of grief, through arms reaching out to feel the way in the darkness. It came. It came, not because they'd found some sure-fire way to enliven the worship services on Sunday morning. It came, not because they finally got their political party in office. It came, not because they found an innovative program for mission action. It came because our God is a God who breathes life into dead bones. Why? Because God is not done.

The resurrection did not change this Good Friday world of ours. The resurrection changed the disciples & the world never looked the same to them again. And they found themselves remembering Jesus' words,

"In the world, you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world."

We know why the world is weeping & we are called to stand alongside the weeping of this world. So you, who weep, hear this news. Christ came for you. Resurrection is about the breath of God's spirit that breathes life into us & calls us forth to keep on in the light. Resurrection is about reconciling the spirit within us so that hope might live on within the darkness of a weeping world.

Jesus did not leave us with an empty longing. Jesus the Christ left us with light, the hope, the spirit of seeing in a way that the world cannot see. The disciples began to see it. They began to see it in the dim mist of a devastating morning. Christ lives on in our hearts & in our lives. We will bring good news to the afflicted. We will bind up the broken-hearted. We will proclaim liberty to the captives & we will open the prison for those who are bound. We will feel our way in the darkness. We will hold onto God's vision of a world made whole, for Christ is risen. Thanks be to God.

So we take our stand beside Ezekiel & proclaim hope to the dry bones. "Thus, says the Lord, I will cause breath to enter you & you shall live!"

We shall live. We who gave up hope, who gave up dreaming – we who have settled for a comfortably routine life of work, bills & dirty laundry. We who think our best years are behind us. We who think that Lord God has forgotten all about our life.

But God is not done.

Arise! Arise from the heap of discarded dreams. Arise to discover that the Holy Spirit is breathing life back into you. Arise to live with magnificent hope! Because the world is dying for you to believe God is not done.

Amen.