

Dry Bones

Ezekiel 37:1-14

¹The 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. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and 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, and 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, prophesy, 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 prophesy, 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.”

John 11: 1-45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” ¹¹After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” ¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶Thomas, who

was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” ²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Romans 8: 6-11

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Today is the Fifth Sunday in Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday.

Thanks to Linda for reading the Scripture passages this morning. That was a lot of reading to do. If you were paying attention to what she was reading, then you probably saw a common theme to the three Scripture passages - death - and resurrection.

There were three friends from a local congregation that were asked "When you're in your casket, and friends and congregation members are mourning over you, what would you like them to say?"

Artie said: "I would like them to say I was a wonderful husband, a fine spiritual leader, and a great family man."

Eugene commented: "I would like them to say I was a wonderful teacher and servant of God who made a huge difference in peoples lives."

Don said: "I'd like them to say, 'Look, he's moving!'"

I love these scriptures. Sometimes the Lectionary scriptures can be a little dry, so it is a real treat to have a story like this one from Ezekiel. I have to tell you that this story really scared me when I first heard it told in Sunday School. I was probably 6 or 7 at the time. The mental picture of a man walking through a valley full of bones as God talked to him was scary to a little boy with a vivid imagination. The thought of all those bones reassembling themselves into skeletons, then growing flesh, and finally coming back to life.

Today when I read this passage I get a different mental picture. That's because this passage from Ezekiel reminds me of a scene from the third *Lord of the Rings* movie, *Return of the King*. In the scene, Aragorn the soon-to-be King goes into a cave to summon help from a city of mostly-dead warriors to help in defeating the evil forces arrayed against them. As they walk through this dark underground

cavern, they have to walk across the floor littered with human bones. The looks on the faces of Gimli, the dwarf, and Legolas, the elf, show their disgust as they step on, and smash the bones. Later in the scene, the three of them are nearly buried in an avalanche of human skulls as they try and escape the cave.

The reason that the story of the dry bones scared me as a kid, is that at the time I didn't realize that it was a dream. God came to Ezekiel in a dream, showed him the dry bones, and told him to prophesy to them and bring them back to life.

Who was Ezekiel, and why did God come to him in a dream and tell him to prophesy? Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah. But where Jeremiah was living in Jerusalem and prophesying about its destruction, Ezekiel was already in Babylon with the Israelites exiled there. He was a sort of street-preacher, preaching to the Jews in this faraway city. As a street preacher, he used vivid stories like this one to get his point across.

What point is he trying to get across? What is Ezekiel telling the Israelites in Babylon? Well, the bones represent the Jewish nation in captivity. As Ezekiel says in verse 11 - *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.'*

Ezekiel probably felt like he was talking to the dead. If he was like most of the street preachers that I have seen over the years, the people that walk by paid little attention to what he had to say. But Ezekiel had an important message. His message was that God was there, that God was aware of their suffering and despair, and that God would restore the nation of Israel to wholeness. Ezekiel's message was one of God's power and of hope for the future.

Now let us go forward in time about five hundred years to the time of Jesus. The nation of Israel is back from Babylon, but now under the domination of the Romans. Jesus's earthly ministry is nearing its end as we will find out over the next two Sundays.

Over the course of his ministry, Jesus has become friends with a family living in the small town of Bethany, a couple of miles from Jerusalem on the road to Jericho. The family consists of two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. This is the same Mary and Martha that we remember from the familiar story in the 10th chapter of gospel of St. Luke.

Jesus is preaching with his disciples at a location a day or so distant from Bethany - John says that Jesus was "*across the Jordan in the place where John had been baptizing earlier.*" The sisters send a messenger to Jesus to tell him that Lazarus is ill. Jesus stays where he is at for another two days before coming to Bethany. You may be asking yourself, Why didn't Jesus leave right away and get to Bethany before Lazarus dies? After all, it would have spared the sisters the heartbreak of losing their brother. It would probably been easier on Lazarus too.

Well, Biblical scholars have pondered that question also, as you might have guessed. They have studied how long it would have taken the messenger to find Jesus, and how long it would have taken Jesus to get to Bethany, and how long Lazarus was dead, and concluded that Lazarus probably was dead before the messenger reached Jesus. Hey, there are people doing their doctoral dissertations in theology on just these sorts of questions.

Jesus knows that Lazarus is dead because he tells the disciples "*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to awaken him*" The disciples, in their usual clueless manner, misunderstand what Jesus says and think that Jesus is saying that Lazarus is asleep, or in a coma, or something. So Jesus has to spell it out to them, saying "*Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.*" This points to a second reason why Jesus didn't rush back to Bethany. He wants to use Lazarus's death to teach the disciples, and presumably others, of the power of God.

By the way, something to keep in mind - when Jesus uses the word "asleep", the Greek word can mean "asleep" *or* "dead". And when he uses the word "awaken", the word can also mean "to save".

Jesus returns to Bethany, and is met by Martha. Martha knows that Jesus is the Messiah and believes that Jesus could have saved her brother from dying. Mary

does also. But they don't believe that Jesus can resurrect Lazarus from the dead. It was a belief among the Jews of that time that a person's spirit hung around the body for three days after death, hoping to rejoin the body. On the fourth day, the spirit gave up hope and departed to the hereafter. So Mary, Martha, and the others assembled there probably assumed that it was too late to do anything for Lazarus.

Martha and Mary have good reason to be distraught. Not only have they lost their brother, but they have lost their breadwinner. Without Lazarus, Martha and Mary are much like widows of that time. They are likely to face the eventual loss of everything they have, and be reduced to a life of poverty.

Martha and Mary believe in Jesus, believe in his power, but they don't believe totally. In that respect, they are just like you and me. We believe in Jesus, but we have great difficulty in trusting in Him totally. Jesus tells them "*Your brother will rise again.*", but Martha assumes that Jesus is referring to Lazarus's eventual resurrection on Judgement Day. So Jesus said to her, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*"

This statement is what this story has been leading up to. This is the punch line of the story, so to speak. What John wants us to know - what Jesus wants us to know. No wonder it is one of the best known and most widely quoted scriptures from the Bible.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Of course, Jesus isn't saying that we will never physically die. Even though Jesus restores life to Lazarus, Lazarus will eventually die again and stay dead. Then as now, the death rate is holding steady at 100 percent. What Jesus promises is that our death is only the prelude to our resurrection. Death no longer has to have power over us.

The story ends when Jesus comes to Lazarus's tomb, has the rock removed from in

front of the cave, and commands Lazarus to come out. John says that *“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.”*

If the story of Lazarus sounds a little familiar, perhaps it is because over the course of the next two Sundays we will hear a story that is very similar. The story we will hear is “THE STORY” - the Easter story. Instead of Lazarus’s death, it will be Jesus’s death. Instead of Lazarus’s resurrection, it will be Jesus’s resurrection. But this Sunday we get a taste of what is to come.

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Do you believe? Do you believe that Jesus is resurrection, that Jesus is life?

Is there someone you know that is dead spiritually? Or emotionally? Is there someone you know whose relationship with others had died? Someone who has cut themselves off from friends, or family, or church?

If there *is* someone that you know who needs to be raised from the dead, please consider what you can do to bring them back to life, to their family, to their friends, to their church. Please consider trusting the love and power of Jesus to resurrect and restore, and renew. Consider trusting Jesus when he says *“I am the resurrection and the life.”*

Amen.

Opening Hymn: #384 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Hymn before Sermon: #420 Breathe on Me Breath of God

Closing Hymn: #154 All Hail the Power of Jesus Name

Greeting:

Leader: Hear the good news:

People: Thus says the Lord God, I am going to open your graves, O my people; and will bring you out.

Leader: You are forgiven and alive.

People: Glory to God. Amen.

Opening Prayer:

UMH #268

Prayer for Illumination:

BOW #344

Psalter:

UMH #848 - Psalm 130

Affirmation of Faith:

UMH #887

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

BOW #554

Benediction:

BOW #563