

## **Can Dead Bones Live?**

**March 25 and 26, 2023**

**Fifth Sunday of Lent**

**Fifth in a Series of Seven Sermons**

**Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:1-11, John 11:17-27, 38-53**

**Ezekiel 37:1-14 - The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Last week’s question - Disciples asking Jesus “Why was this man born blind?” Two weeks ago, Moses asking the people “Why do you quarrel?” Three weeks ago, Abraham’s family asking, “Where are we going?” Four weeks ago, God asking Adam, “Where are you?” and “Who told you that you’re naked?” And of course the question that God is asking in all of these narratives and throughout human history - will you trust me?

Today, can dead bones live?

Dale, Ed, and George were talking one day about what they hoped people would say as they walked by their casket. George said, “I hope they will say that I was a good family man, that I was kind and patient with my wife, that I brought up my children right, and that I was dependable.” Ed spoke up, “I hope they will say that I was an expert craftsman, that I could tell a great story, that I was hilarious, that I was trustworthy and the life of the party.” Dale thought for a moment and said, “I hope that when people walk by my casket, they point and say, “Hey, I think I just saw him move.”

Can dead bones live? That’s the question God asked Ezekiel as he gave him a vision of a valley full of dry bones. It’s the question Mary and Martha were asking in today’s Gospel lesson about their brother Lazarus? It’s the question all of us have asked as we have walked away from countless gravesite ceremonies for beloved spouses, parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, children, grandchildren, and friends.

Can dead bones live? Three answers to that question in our sermon today. All in the form of questions, all answered in the affirmative.

## **Question #1 arises from our Old Testament lesson, Did Judah return from Babylonian exile?**

The faith of the child of God is constantly threatened by two opposite dangers - overconfidence and despair. It was to the second of these dangers that God's message in Ezekiel 37 is addressed.

Ezekiel lived in a time of international upheaval. Assyria had dominated the Middle East and had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Then Assyria was itself overthrown by Babylonia, which is the forerunner of the modern country of Iraq. Ten thousand of the leading Jews were exiled, including Ezekiel. Ezekiel kept on preaching hope and optimism, but they had been crushed militarily. They had watched their neighbors killed and enslaved and forcibly resettled. They had good reason to be upset and frightened. Many of them no longer trusted in God.

Verse 11 - Behold they say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off."

Can dead bones live? Normal people would say no, of course not. Baptized and believing Christians would answer, yes, of course. Ezekiel gives a third answer, "O Lord God, you know." Or to say it another way, "If it is in your will, O Lord, they will live." Our lesson today isn't so much about the ability of God. It's about the promise of God to rescue His people, in spite of what they may believe is overwhelming odds against them.

Our Lord not only commanded Ezekiel to speak. He told him exactly what to say. He commanded the dry bones to hear the Word of the Lord, and as he prophesied, there was a rattling sound. He prophesied that breath would enter these bones and that the bones would come to life, and that's exactly what happened in this vision. He preached that he would lay sinews upon these bones and that flesh would cover them with skin, and even as he prophesied, it all came to pass.

The Kingdom of Judah was like that valley of dry and dead bones. One would think they would have learned once and for all the value of repentance and faith and obedience in 430 years of enslavement to Egyptian taskmasters. But no, they had to learn it again in 40 years of wandering in the wilderness before they could enter the Promised Land. And now, it would be 70 years of exile before there would be widespread repentance and a paying attention to the preaching and teaching of God's Word. At which time, God raised their nation from the

dead. He returned them to their land. He saw to it that kings gave permission for Jerusalem and their beloved temple to be rebuilt.

Ezekiel summarizes, **“And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves. And I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.**

**Question #2 arises from today’s Gospel lesson, Did Lazarus rise up from his grave?**

Is the one true God able to raise dead people to life? Scriptures give us at least ten examples of Him doing exactly that.

1. In I Kings, we have Elijah taking the Zaraphath widow’s dead son in his arms, carrying him up to his upper chamber, laying him on his own bed, crying out to the Lord for help, stretching himself upon the child three times, crying out for new life, and the Lord listening to the voice of Elijah.
2. In 2 Kings, we have Elisha raising the son of the Schunamite widow by laying on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him the flesh of the child became warm. In time, the child sneezes seven times, and opens his eyes.
3. Also in II Kings, we have the surprising account of gravediggers who were in the process of burying a man / they saw Moab raiders coming towards them / they were afraid and threw the dead man into the grave of Elisha, and when his body came into contact with the bones of the prophet Elisha, he came back to life
4. Luke 7 - Jesus interrupts a funeral processional, tells a mom to stop crying, touches the casket, says, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” He sits up and begins to speak. Jesus hands him back to his mom.
5. Luke 8 - Jesus takes the daughter of Jairus by the hand, says, “Child, arise,” she does. He directs that something should be given her to eat.
6. John 11 - Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of the grave and he does.
7. In Acts 9, Peter kneels down, prays, says, “Tabitha, arise,” she opens her eyes, sits up, he takes her by the hand, helps her up, and presents her to friends and family.
8. Also in Acts, a young man named Eutyches falls asleep while Paul is preaching, falls out of the balcony, dies, Paul goes to him, takes him in his arms, brings him back to life.

9. At the death of Jesus, Matthew records that many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.
10. The big one - the day of resurrection, as predicted, Jesus is raised to life and spends the next 40 days proving it by appearing to all kinds of individuals, and groups large and small.

Will there be a worldwide resurrection of the body on the last day? Permit me to throw a few statistics your way. In the year 2022, 67.1 million people died, worldwide. Today, the world population stands at 7.888 billion. From the beginning of world history, experts suggest that 117 billion people have been born. With just a couple of exceptions like Enoch and Elijah, all have returned to dust and ashes. That's a lot of dust and ashes, a lot of caskets and cemeteries, lots of dry and decaying bones.

Can dry and decaying bones live again. Normal and rational people understandably say no. But the baptizing and believing people of God hold it to be true that **we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed...When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory. O grave, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."**

**Question #3 arises from today's Epistle lesson. Is there new life for those who live according to the Spirit? (Romans 8:1-11)**

At the beginning of today's sermon, I suggested that the faith of the child of God is constantly threatened by two opposite dangers - overconfidence and despair. And that Ezekiel 37 clearly speaks to the second of those dangers - despair. In closing today, I invite you to reflect on whatever it is that is tempting you to despair in this chapter of your life. To think, just for a few moments on that which is distracting you away from the promises of your God / that which is causing anxiety or frustration or even bitterness to build up in your heart and cause troubles in your relationships.

Throughout this Lenten season, we have learned one of God's significant questions to His people throughout human history - will you trust me?

To use the language of today's Old Testament lesson, you can live life in one of two ways - as if you are in a valley full of dry bones full of hopelessness and pessimism. Or as if you are alongside a river that gives life to all that it touches. You can live in the fellowship of a local congregation of baptized and believing children of God, or you can strike out on your own and see how that goes for you.

You can live according to the flesh by setting your minds on the things of the flesh. Or you can live according to the Spirit by setting your minds on the things of the Spirit. That's how Paul encouraged the early Christians in Rome - by pointing out the simple good news that for those who are in Christ, there is now therefore no condemnation. And where there is no condemnation from God in heaven above, there is a freedom to be enjoyed here and now.

True freedom comes in knowing that on the one hand the sins of our past have been paid for in full by Christ at the cross. They have been sent away as far as the east is from the west. And on the other hand, our futures are in the hands of Almighty God whose love for us is as deep and as long and as wide as it can possibly be. Leaving us with just today, to live one day at a time with the freedom and the joy and the peace that only our Risen Savior can offer. One day at a time, with our precious Lord taking us by the hand and leading us on.

Our last song today is Precious Lord, take my hand. It was a favorite song of Tom Gottschalk, one of our long time members who died this past January 18 at the age of 90 years and 19 days. Tom loved his Lord, and even more importantly His Lord Jesus loved him and followed him around in all the days of his life with goodness and mercy. Tom was a Reader of Scriptures in this sanctuary, and his voice had a majesty to it that blessed all of us who were privileged to listen. His family took him back to Wisconsin for burial, and we were unable to hold a funeral service for him here.

Today, we sing our final song in his memory. As we do so, we praise God that his sins, as well as ours, have been forgiven. That when the waters of Baptism splashed, his name, as well as ours, were written in the book of life. That his mansion in heaven, as well as ours, is on reserve. And that his dead bones, as well as ours, will live again. In Jesus' Name. Amen.