

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Resurrection Reality*
Service Theme: *Christ Has Not Left Us Alone*
Sermon Theme: *Life for Dry Bones*
May 19, 2024— Ezekiel 37:1-14

Can you imagine what the headlines would say? The amount of coverage it would receive on the news? How viral it would go on social media? How many people would be here, hoping to witness it the next time? That is, if what happened there...happened here?

If what happened to Ezekiel in that valley happened here in our church on an otherwise sleepy Sunday morning? If, scattered all over the sanctuary were bones instead of Bibles, like some sort of Halloween decorating gone wrong. But instead of the plastic kind you buy at Target, they were the real kind that you bury in tombs—dead, dry bones.

But by just uttering a few powerful words, suddenly those scattered bones began flying together, piece by piece into the skeleton they came from. Then tendons, ligaments, muscles, and skin wrapped around the framework to transform bones into bodies. Then breath filled empty lungs so that lifeless bodies were made alive. Can you imagine all the hoopla from without and within our church if the dead were brought to life here? If there was **Life for Dry Bones** here?

I'll let you in on a little secret: That's exactly what happens here every time we gather for worship, or study God's Word, or witness a Baptism, or receive the Lord's Supper. The dead are brought to life here. There is life for dead, dry bones here!

Maybe you're thinking, "I feel like I would remember that, Pastor!" Fair enough. But to understand what happens here, we need to understand what happened there—to the prophet Ezekiel in a valley filled with dead, dry bones!

We also need to have a little history lesson. Ezekiel was God's priest and prophet during one of the darkest times in the history of the people of Judah. At that time, the Babylonian Empire was the world power. And in 605 B.C., their king Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, captured the city, and deported the nobility and some of the most talented, impressive young men, like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, to Babylon.

8 years later in 597 B.C., Judah's king rebelled against their Babylonian overlords, and Nebuchadnezzar again sent a force to put the rebellion down, this time deporting 10,000 more Jews to Babylon—including Ezekiel.

4 years later in 586 B.C. while he was one of the exiles in Babylon, God called Ezekiel to be his prophet. For the first 7 years of his ministry, Ezekiel's message was one of warning to his fellow Jews—both those with him in exile, and those still in Jerusalem--that divine judgment was coming, and Jerusalem would fall. And in 586 B.C, it did. The walls were leveled; the city was destroyed and plundered; God's holy Temple was burned to the ground; and its people were killed or hauled away as the last wave of exiles to Babylon.

You can imagine how those exiles must have felt in Babylon—the fear, uncertainty, and hopelessness. Maybe you know what that kind of hopelessness feels like! But as much as the people of Judah must have felt like all was lost, God's message to them shifts. After God's warnings of the destruction of Jerusalem had been fulfilled, God's message through Ezekiel became a message of hope; a promise of restoration, renewal, and a return to their homeland in Judah.

God's prophecies through Ezekiel were also filled with tons of imagery and illustration. Like how God had Ezekiel "lay siege" to a little drawing of Jerusalem on a clay tablet. Or how he had him shave his head and beard, and then burn, strike with a sword, or scatter into the wind different portions of the hair to show what would happen to the people. Or how the Lord told Ezekiel his wife would die, but he wasn't to mourn outwardly for her—just as they weren't to mourn the fall of

Jerusalem. And what happened in that valley was certainly another illustrative example!

Ezekiel reveals, ***“The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones...bones that were very dry.*** Whether this actually happened, or whether this was a vision of divine revelation God gave to Ezekiel, we can’t say for sure. Ultimately, God’s message is the same either way. But Ezekiel found himself in a valley full of bones. And it’s important to note that these weren’t newly dead, still warm corpses that might have some hope of resuscitation. These were very dry bones that had been separated from living bodies and baking in the sun for a long time! Which makes the questions God asks Ezekiel sound pretty ridiculous. ***“Son of man, Can these bones live?”***

Give Ezekiel credit for not scoffing or laughing. In sanctified faith he responds, ***“Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”*** He knew that God could accomplish the impossible, but he also knew that such bones being alive was indeed impossible! We know that too. No one sees the roadkill possum carcass that the vultures have been picking at for days and thinks, “That’s got life in it.” No one visits their great-grandparents’ grave and thinks, “These old dry bones can live.” Because dead means dead!

But like Ezekiel assumed, God had another answer, commanding his prophet, ***“Prophecy to these bones and say to them, “Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”***

And as Ezekiel prophesied God’s words, life came into those dry bones. They came together with a rattle; tendons and flesh covered them; then the breath of life animated them so that ***“they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.”***

How could that possibly happen? Obviously, only by the power of God, who can bring the dead to life; just like we celebrated with Jesus’

resurrection on Easter, and his promise to raise our bodies back to life at the Last Day. But while it’s certainly proper to see connections to God’s promise of bodily resurrection, God is pointing to a different kind of life from the dead with this prophetic visual. He’s promising spiritual life from the dead! Spiritual renewal and restoration. As God explained through Ezekiel, ***“My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land.”***

Do you notice what two things God uses to give life to these dry, lifeless bones? Just like it says in the famous spiritual song, ***“Dem bones dem bones dem dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord!”*** By the way, did you know that song has a connection to Jacksonville? It was written by James Wheldon Johnson, who was from Jacksonville, and whom the park downtown is named after! Dry bones...hear the Word of the Lord! It was Ezekiel prophesying God’s Word that brought the dead to life and produced life for dry bones!

The other was that God poured out the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew word for “breath,” can also be translated as “spirit.” And as God calls on the “breath” to give life to these lifeless bodies, he promises his people, ***“I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.”*** God’s Word and the power of the Holy Spirit give life to dry, dead bones. Sound familiar?

That’s exactly what we’re celebrating this morning! On the Day of Pentecost, God poured out the Holy Spirit, the “Advocate” Jesus promised he would send to his disciples after he ascended. The Holy Spirit who enabled Jesus’ disciples to speak the power of the Gospel in different languages so that people from all over the world could hear about Jesus in their own tongues! And as the Apostle Peter addressed the crowd, pointing back to the prophet Joel’s prophesy, ***“I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy,”*** and pointing them to Jesus as their Savior, we’re told about 3,000 people were baptized and came to faith that day! Life was given to dry bones through God’s Word and the power of the Spirit!

Although there’s no reference to bones in the Pentecost reading from Acts, that’s what those people were. As Paul shares the sobering reality

in Ephesians, ***“You were dead in your transgressions and sins.”*** By our sinful nature, all people are spiritually dead in unbelief and the unworthiness of sin. All people are spiritually dry bones unable to do anything for ourselves but stay dead. So dead and helpless on our own that if God asks, ***“Can these bones live?”*** we ought to scoff or laugh sarcastically.

And the problem is, people so often fail to see just how dry and dead we really are—thinking we can be good enough on our own; thinking we’re strong enough to save ourselves apart from God; thinking we’re alive, not dead! But dead is dead.

The only way someone can be spiritually alive is if God has brought us to life through his powerful Word and the work of the Holy Spirit—just like happened in that Valley of dry bones, and in Jerusalem on Pentecost! Just like God did for you through his Word and Sacraments to bring you to spiritual life, but to keep you in that spiritual life. Not just to have eternal life by faith, but to enable us to live our lives in faith! To live life to the fullest, according to God’s definition; that is, to serve, honor, glorify, and thank him with our lives!

Instead of hearing baptism waters dripping, or communion cups clinking, or the Word of God being taught, preached, or sung, what we’re really hearing is rattling as God gives life to dry bones like us through his Means of Grace!

Therefore, what happened there—happens here! When we gather around Word and Sacrament, the Spirit works powerfully to give life! How could we not long to be here, to participate in it, to invite everyone we know to come and be a part of it the next time? How could we neglect any opportunity to dig deeply into the Word that gives life at home-- by ourselves, and with our family and friends?

If you had the power to bring the dead back to life, would you hide that power away? Or would you run to every funeral home and graveside service to give life to lifeless bodies and dry bones? Friends, we have that spiritual power! Just as the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost to empower and enable Jesus’ disciples to proclaim that

message to all people, God has poured out the Holy Spirit on us, so that we can do the same!

And he doesn’t send you out alone to handle the task by yourself. The Holy Spirit goes with you to give your words power as your proclaim God’s Word, so that it won’t return to him empty; so that it will accomplish God’s purposes for it. As Paul writes in Romans, ***“I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.”*** And ***“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word about Christ.”*** The Spirit works powerfully through our proclamation of God’s Word to bring the dead to life; to give life to dry bones!

If God promised to restore and renew the people of Judah, whose rejection and unfaithfulness toward him necessitated their destruction and exile; if God promised to bring them back to their homeland, and bring forth their Savior from them, then who is too far gone for God’s Word to reach? Who is too dead or too dry for God to bring to life? No one, dear friends! No one! So keep soaking up the Word that has given life to our dry bones. And keep proclaiming the Word that will give life in the valley of dry bones we walk through every day. As God promises, ***“I will put my Spirit in you and you will live. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”*** Fill us with your Spirit, and use us, dear Lord!