

The hand of the LORD was upon 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. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’ ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ 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.’ ”

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’ ”

¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet— a vast army.

¹¹ Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’ ” (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

Life from the Dead

“Let me outta here!” Have you ever heard that at a funeral? Probably not. The person inside the box banging on the lid is the kind of thing you see on TV, but it doesn’t happen in real life. I once read a novel in which a young pastor started out determined to just preach the word no matter what people thought. But as the years went by, he made compromise after compromise to be popular, to make his church grow, to get people to give more money. He felt guilty and started to drink. As his life was collapsing around him, he conducted a funeral in which he was totally plowed. But he was trying to get back to the gospel, so he started the funeral sermon by banging on the lid of the coffin and telling the person inside to wake up. Now, I’ve never done that at any funeral I’ve ever conducted. But all our lessons for today are about **life from the dead**. One way or another, they all teach us about how God conquers death and gives us life. Today, we want to focus on the Old Testament lesson, the most famous verses of the book of Ezekiel, the valley of dry bones.

I.

Now, it’s a natural for us to think of all God’s resurrection promises as things that lie in the future. Faith is being certain of things that we don’t see yet. None of us can see heaven. And we all have to wait for Jesus to come back before we’ll see the dead rise. But God’s resurrection promises still mean something for us today, because today is when we suffer. We hurt while we’re here. Ezekiel was hurting and his people were heart broken when God gave him this vision to lift them up here and now. Like the people of Israel, we need to understand **what life from the dead means now**.

Ezekiel lived at the time when Jerusalem was destroyed. After generations of unfaithfulness, God finally destroyed his capital city and sent the survivors of his people into exile. Now, to do that, he used the Babylonian Empire under King Nebuchadnezzar. Before the final destruction, several times, Nebuchadnezzar deported groups of Jewish people to Babylon. Ezekiel was one of those people deported early. He was a priest and in Babylon, God called him to be a prophet. Well, by the time we get to the valley of the dry bones, Jerusalem has been destroyed. The nation has died for all practical purposes. Word has reached the exiles in Babylon that all their hopes of ever going home were finished. The faithful believers who longed to go home and worship God in the temple of Solomon, could imagine no greater disaster.

That's when God gave Ezekiel this vision. He picked him up and set him down in the middle of a valley full of human bones. They weren't even skeletons. They were just scattered skulls and femurs and all kinds of other bones. He had Ezekiel walk back and forth among them so that he could see just how dried out and dead they were. Then God asked him what should've been a very obvious question: **"Son of man, can these bones live?"** Of course not! We're not talking about a doctor reattaching a severed finger minutes after an accident happens. But Ezekiel didn't give the obvious answer. Instead, he said, **"O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."** Why do you think he said that? Ezekiel understood how visions work. More than that, Ezekiel understood the power of God. He knew that if it was God's will, dead bones could live. And I think God must have smiled at his star pupil's answer.

Then God gave him a command: **"Prophecy to these bones!"** Understand, "prophecy" here does not mean "foretell the future." It means "Preach to these bones!" Preach what? **"Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!"** Dry bones don't have ears. But God told Ezekiel to preach to them and promise that breath would enter them and that skin and flesh would cover them and they would live. Then when Ezekiel did as he was told, there was a rattling noise and the bones came together and formed skeletons. Then flesh and muscle and skin covered them. But that's all. A pile of dead bodies lay there on the valley floor. Then God told Ezekiel, **"Prophecy to the breath!"** He was to command the breath to enter these dead bodies so that they could live. That's exactly what happened. They stood up and lived, **"a vast army"** Ezekiel calls them.

Did all this really happen? No. Not literally. This was a vision. Like all visions, it was a message from God. He explained what it meant in the verses that followed. After the destruction of Jerusalem, the people were saying, **"Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."** When something tragic happens, sometimes you struggle to find a way to say what it feels like. This is what they came up with. God seized on their own words to comfort them. The dry bones were the dead house of Israel. And God promised that Israel would live. God was going to resurrect his people from exile and destruction and bring them home.

You know what? God did such a good job of keeping his promise that five hundred years later their descendants were living in Jerusalem and Bethlehem and Nazareth when Jesus came. God did such a good job that 2500 years later, the physical people of Israel still exists. And the spiritual heirs of God's promises are spread all over the earth in the form of the Christian Church. We live spiritually and we will live forever physically because God kept this promise to Israel.

That is our reason to hope, too. The Christian Church is the true people of God. And God has given us life from the dead. We were all born dead in sin and in rebellion against God. But he came to us in the gospel and raised us from spiritual death. He gave us faith – life – in Christ. And now, no matter how hard it gets here, God promises us life. I've been talking a lot lately about the real challenges we face as a congregation. It might feel, at times, like our congregation is dying, or like the WELS is dying. But the power of the gospel is still real. Even if the WELS collapses and our church closes, God can and will bring life from the dead. How does he do that? "Prophecy, Son of Man!" he said. Proclaim the victory of Christ! He died. But he rose and conquered the devil and all that stands against us. The gates of hell will not prevail against us.

But challenges to our church are not the only things that can make us feel like our bones are dried out and our hope is gone. When I was in college, I spent three years working at Bethesda Lutheran Home in Watertown, Wisconsin. The residents there all suffered from severe developmental disabilities. Some were blind or deaf. A great many spent their lives in wheelchairs. Most had a mental age of two or less. Many couldn't talk at all, or only a little bit. Many times I thought about how wonderful it would be if God gave me the power to lay my hands on those residents and heal them. Sometimes, when I was working at night, I would imagine what it would be like if the day shift came in and every single resident had been healed. In the 24 years that I've been a pastor, I've made thousands of hospital calls and shut in calls, and I've often wished the same thing. Of course, God didn't give me that power. Instead, he calls us to live with those hurts and sorrows, just as he called those Jewish exiles to live with their pain and loss.

To help us do that, he calls us to prophecy, to preach the good news to each other. Through that good news he gives us life even when we feel dead. Jesus rose. We will all rise. That promise means that real, physical healing is coming. Jesus rose. We will all rise. That promise has the very power of God built into it. It lifts our hearts. It makes us new again even when all we feel is dead and broken and lost. Jesus rose. He has defeated all that we face here. He has conquered death, which is the source of all our pain. He hears our prayers. He answers them all. Because he loves us, often, he gives us the relief we need in this life. But even

when he doesn't, he answers us with the strength we need to endure until the final healing comes. Jesus rose and he gives us life from the dead every day that we have to struggle along here in this dying world.

II.

When our children were young, we took a vacation out to Yellowstone. We saw things out there that I'll never forget. But when we finally reached the entrance to the park, I was a little taken aback. There are huge sections of the park that have been burned out by forest fires. Even years after those fires, you see thousands of dead, white, standing trees. It's not very beautiful. But the dead trees aren't the only thing there. New growth is coming up. If the world lasts long enough, one day, old growth forest will stand there where death once reigned. Is that what we mean by **life from the dead**? Are we just talking about what some people call "the circle of life"? No. We're talking about something greater. We're talking about God putting an end to "the circle of life" and simply replacing death with life. Ezekiel used resurrection to talk about a physical act of God in this world: God was going to bring Israel back and restore his people. But it's not possible for us to pass by this text without talking about the greater reality of **what life from the dead means forever**.

You see, the whole physical nation of Israel is a picture of God conquering sin and death and setting his people free forever. So we can't leave this story without remembering what Israel finally means for us: closing every graveyard that has ever existed. I have my computer in my office set to show random pictures from my files as a screensaver. Every few seconds, it pulls up one or more pictures. One day this week, I walked into the office and I saw a picture of my grandfather holding my son on his lap when he was baby. My grandpa went home to heaven not too long after that picture was taken. He went there because of what Jesus did for us. The hurt in our hearts that comes from losing people we love is healed in God's promises that all believers will live.

In the end, it wasn't extreme old age that claimed my grandpa. It was sin. We're all born dead in sin and doomed to hell. While I loved my grandpa and he was what we would call "a good man," without Jesus he would be in hell today. But Jesus came to give us life from the dead. He was perfect in my grandpa's place. And in my place. And in yours. God counts that for us. Then Jesus died to pay for all our sin, for all the sin of all the world. Then he rose. In that resurrection, he promised us that we are forgiven. He promised us life. You heard Jesus himself make that promise in our gospel lesson for today: **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."** We will never die. Even though the years destroy these bodies, we will go on living. My grandpa is in heaven today, as are so many loved ones that we've all said good-bye to. And whoever believes in Jesus will live, even though they die. These bodies are going to rise. One day, the coffins are going to burst open. The people inside won't bang on the lid and ask to be let out. They're going to burst from their graves and stand upon this earth again. If we're dead when that day comes, we are going to burst out of our tombs and stand before Jesus.

If we're alive still when he comes, we're going to be changed. We need to be changed, because we're all dying right now. Last week, I had the privilege of holding a day old baby in my arms. It's one of my favorite parts about being a pastor. Now, I never ask because I understand that people are a little protective of newborns. But if I ever get to visit you in the hospital a day or two after your baby is born, and you offer, I'm gonna take you up on it. But you know what? Even a newborn is dying. God willing, not for eighty or ninety years, but every day carries them closer to the grave. But when Jesus comes back, we will all live. And we won't be dying anymore. Our bodies will be whole and perfect – better than they ever were here. And our hearts will be free from sin, so we won't need to die. So we will live with Jesus in a perfect world forever.

Life from the dead. That's what God has given us. Life from the dead. That's what gives us hope now. Life from the dead. Cling to the promise. Amen.