

*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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”*

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

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

*<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.*

*<sup>9</sup> 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.’ ”*

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

*<sup>11</sup> 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.’ <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. <sup>14</sup> 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)*

### **The Spirit Gives Life**

Have you ever had to give someone CPR? Have you ever had someone charge up the paddles and restart your heart? When I was a child, when that happened, you used to hear people say, “I was clinically dead for two minutes.” I don’t think any doctor uses that definition of death today. Yet, we would say that if someone ever used a defibrillator on you and restarted your heart, they did save your life. Is that the same as giving someone life? Usually, when we say that, we’re thinking of giving birth, right? But today, God directs our attention to the other end of our existence here. He talks about giving life to the dead. But he’s not talking about CPR or a defibrillator. We all understand that there’s a window during which you can restart a heart before brain death sets in. If someone has been dead for an hour or two, it’s too late for a doctor to do anything about it. If someone has been in the morgue for a couple of days, no defibrillator in the world is going to get their hearts going again. But God doesn’t talk about someone who’s been in the morgue for a couple of days or even a couple of weeks. He doesn’t talk about someone who’s already had rigor mortis set in or who’s begun to decay. He talks about bones, dry, scattered bones. The flesh is long gone. The bones aren’t even connected to each other anymore. And God pictures a miracle, a miracle that has meaning for you and me today as we celebrate the Festival of Pentecost. This famous vision from the book of Ezekiel really announces the meaning of this great festival: **The Holy Spirit gives life.**

#### **I.**

This is a vision. Ezekiel did not actually go to a valley that was full of dried out human bones and watch God bring them back to life. Ezekiel says that he went out “in the Spirit.” Like all visions in the Bible, this one is full of symbolic things and actions that God uses to make a point. Ezekiel in Babylon. But he wasn’t born there. He was born in Israel. But during his lifetime, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, began to deport the people of Israel to Babylon. Ezekiel went in one of the earlier waves. But not long before he saw this vision, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city of Jerusalem and burned the temple to the ground and executed the king and his sons. Most of the rest of the survivors were on their way to exile. Word had come to Jews in Babylon that their last hope was gone. God used this vision to give his people a new hope. This vision is not a picture of Judgment Day, even though it talks about dead people coming back to life. This vision is a picture of God’s people coming back to spiritual life.

Notice what God says at the end of the vision: **“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.’”** The people of Israel were in despair. Once Jerusalem was destroyed and the last of their people were taken away, it seemed like their nation was dead. Once the temple was burned down, it seemed like God had abandoned them to the punishment they so richly deserved. Despair is a very dangerous weapon of the devil. It’s the opposite of faith. The Bible defines faith as being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. God promises us that our sins are forgiven. But we don’t actually see his courtroom in heaven and quite often, there are consequences to our sins down here, everything from prison terms to angry spouses and lost friendships. When we go through those consequences, it doesn’t feel like we’re forgiven. But faith knows we are. In the same way, God says that we’re going to heaven when we die, that our bodies will rise on the last day, that God never lets anything touch our lives unless it has a good purpose. But we don’t get to see heaven or Judgment Day yet. Sometimes, we can’t see what blessing God could possibly give us from some terrible pain we’re suffering. But faith trusts God’s promises anyway.

Despair doesn’t. We can feel so guilty that we don’t think God could ever forgive us. We can hurt so much that we don’t think it will ever stop so we figure it’s best just to kill ourselves. We can see all that we’ve worked for crumble to dust and figure that nothing could ever be the same again. Despair gives up all hope, for this life and for the life to come. In the end, it kills our faith in the things that we cannot see because it focuses so totally on how much the things we can see hurt. If our faith dies, we will go to hell just like any other unbeliever.

God’s people were in despair and they were dying spiritually. Israel was the church of Ezekiel’s day. When we look around at the state of the church today, it might feel like we’re not in any better shape than the church of Ezekiel’s day was in. A survey came out a week or two ago that indicated that the number of Americans who identify themselves as Christians is lower now than it ever has been, at least since they started doing polls like that. Huge numbers of people are giving up on “organized religion.” Huge numbers of people are finding that Christianity just doesn’t say anything to them – in spite of the millions of dollars and the countless hours Christian churches are pouring into outreach. Of course, the media is doing a full court press to get us to adopt anti-Christian values and to identify what the Bible says with hate speech. Closer to home, week after week, we struggle to meet our financial obligations and our attendance has been rocky and it all looks like a disaster.

In the vision, God set Ezekiel down in that valley full of piles of dead, dry bones, and he asked, **“Son of man, can these bones live?”** The obvious answer is no. But Ezekiel recognized that God had a reason for asking, so he said, **“O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”** Of course, we’d all love to hear Ezekiel say, “Yes, Lord! They can live by the power of your word!” But the piles of bones challenged his faith so he turned the question back to God. Don’t we do that every day? As Judgment Day draws closer and the love of most grows cold, the piles of dead, dry spiritual bones heave up higher and higher. It often feels like the Church is dying. As we become more and more depressed and defeated by what we see, as we struggle with our own hurts and sorrows and losses, despair can raise its ugly head in our hearts and we can feel our own faith begin to die.

But God takes people who are dead and gone spiritually and he makes them alive. God did that for you and me. We aren’t believers because we’re good people, or because we made a choice for God, or because we didn’t resist as much as other people did. When the Holy Spirit came to us, we were dead, dry bones with no hope of ever living again. But God reached into our hearts and he gave us faith. He made us alive. Now, for many of us, he did it when we were babies through the waters of holy baptism. But he did that miracle.

He keeps on doing miracles. Our real problem is the sin in our hearts. It’s still there and it keeps trying to kill our faith. It wallows in despair and refuses to trust God. That sin deserves God’s punishment forever. But Christ died for that sin that won’t go away. Christ died for our despair and our failure to trust in him. Christ died for all people on earth. And Christ rose to give us life, life now and life forever in heaven. Christ gave us his Church. He will never stop giving life to his people, so there will always be a people of God to proclaim what Christ has done. The Church will never die.

Jesus rose to tell us that. The Festival of Pentecost is all about the Holy Spirit taking that good news to the ends of the earth and making living Christians out of dead unbelievers. Ezekiel saw that for God’s Old Testament people. He saw God conquering unbelief, which is spiritual death so that he could conquer physical death and hell. What was true in the Old Testament is still true today. Every one of us is born dead, spiritually

stillborn, spiritually dead, dry bones. Can these bones live? Yes, because God does a miracle. **The Spirit gives life to people who are spiritually dead.**

## II.

How does God do that? The vision shows us where he puts his power. It shows us the one way God chooses to give us real spiritual life. God gives Ezekiel a command that just doesn't make any sense. He tells him, "**Prophecy to these bones.**" He does not mean, "Tell them the future." He means, "Preach to them!" Why on earth would anyone ever preach to dead, dry bones? They can't hear you. They can't respond. I don't go out to cemeteries and preach to the dead there. But God tells Ezekiel to do just that. And he tells him what to say: "**Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: 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.**"

God promises that the Word of the LORD will change everything. When the bones hear that Word, God will act. In the vision he promises that he will join the scattered bones into skeletons and cover them with flesh and give them life. What will be the result? They will know that he is indeed, the LORD. In their despair, they will see the power and love of God and understand that his promises are still good and his plan is still in effect. They will trust in what they can't see because the word of God creates faith in their hearts. That's exactly what happened in the vision. Ezekiel preached to the bones and they become dead bodies. Ezekiel preached to the wind and breath entered the bodies and a great army of people lived. In real life, Ezekiel preached and God's people came back to spiritual life. He was God's messenger to a broken and despairing nation. God used him to preserve their faith through seventy years of exile. God used him to enable them to trust in the plan and purposes of their Lord. God's Word kept their faith alive until the Lord brought that nation back home and they rebuilt the temple and lived there until Jesus came, five hundred years later.

God gives us a command that just doesn't make any sense in the world we live in: preach the gospel. God doesn't tell us to conquer the world. God doesn't tell us to send armies to the Middle East to defeat ISIS and end the reign of terror of Islamic fundamentalism. God doesn't tell us to form a political party and defeat the forces that want to pervert marriage into gay marriage, or set up a legal code that follows the Ten Commandments and put people in jail for sleeping around or getting drunk or skipping church. God commands us to simply proclaim the law and the gospel. To convict sin with his word and then to tell people his word about Jesus. And he will bring them back to life. He will revive the Church. He will nourish and grow our sinking spiritual life with that word.

That word – especially the gospel in that word – is the very power of God. It's the one way that God gives spiritual life. So God still commands us to prophesy, to preach it, and when dead, dry bones and living, breathing Christians hear that word, God acts in our hearts. Is the Church dying? No. Because the word of God is the power of God and as long as we proclaim Christ crucified and risen for us, the Holy Spirit will change hearts. He will take people who are dead in sin and make them alive in Christ. He will work in the Church no matter how beaten down and dead it looks in this world. God's Word will work until that day comes when Jesus returns to physically raise the dead and give us a new heavens and a new earth, where we will live with him forever. **The Spirit gives life through his Word.**

God did much more than hit us with a defibrillator or give us spiritual CPR. God took our dead, dry bones and made us living, active Christians. God did that with his word and sacraments. In the same way, God keeps us from turning back into dry bones day after day, Sunday after Sunday. God does that throughout the world. Today, a mighty army of Christians stands throughout the world, trusting in Christ. You are one of those Christians. You are alive by his power today. That is the miracle of Pentecost. That miracle will continue until our Lord returns. Amen.