

## *“Can these bones live?”*

**April 10, 2011**

*Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:17-44*

### I.

As we move towards *holy week* and the compelling events that lead to Jesus’ suffering, death and subsequent resurrection from the dead, issues of *life* and *death* become more prominent.

In our readings this morning—both from Ezekiel and from John’s gospel—the specter of death is all about.

1. In the valley of dry bones recounted in **Ezekiel 37** ...
2. and with the dead **Lazarus**, Jesus’ friend and the brother of Jesus’ close friends, Martha and Mary.

While both of these dramatic situations are, initially, about death, the message they eventually give way to is about life. The death—in the valley of dry bones (a vision of the prophet Ezekiel) and with Lazarus—becomes, in each instance, an occasion for the life-giving power of God to be revealed.

The biblical story that unfolds, from Lent through Easter, is about the God who gives life in the midst of death; the God who calls us, out of our dying, despair and darkness, to life.

**Can these bones live?** What a question?

### II.

Would we seriously, ever, really ask such a question? Because, if the answer is NO, then why would you ask the question to begin with?

The context, you’ll recall, is a vision where of the prophet Ezekiel is brought out by the spirit and set down in a valley of dry bones. The historical period is the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Ezekiel is given an extensive tour of this valley, with dry bones everywhere. After the tour, God asks Ezekiel, **Mortal man, can these bones live?**

Who knows? Do you know? Do I do? Could Ezekiel possibly know? Of course not! And that’s what Ezekiel says: ***O Lord God, only you know.***

We can feel the drama building here because we can’t help but sense that this is all moving in a positive way ... towards a positive outcome. This dramatic unfolding is a reminder that we should never underestimate the power of God to give new life and new

hope in any situation.

**Can these bones live?** Can this desolation and death give way to new life? Can this despair and gloom yield to new hope?

And in our story of Lazarus, *could not this Jesus, who opened the eyes of the blind man—could he not have kept this man from dying?*

In the biblical narrative—in both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures—and for us as people of faith, death NEVER has the last word. NEVER! Our lives are about LIFE. Death is something we respect; it has much to teach us; but it is NEVER the final word.

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

I announce these faith-packed words at every funeral and memorial service I do. As Christians, we believe this.

### III.

This vision of Ezekiel is a vision for a people who have been utterly heart broken. In the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Israel rebels against Babylon, the dominant world power at the time. In response, Babylon attacks Israel (puts Israel *under siege*) and over a ten year period brings complete destruction upon her.

Jerusalem is destroyed and plundered, along with temple. The king is killed, the monarchy dismantled, and the surviving royalty, aristocracy and all of the upper classes are deported off to Babylon in what is known as the Exile. There were probably about eight to ten thousand in all. It was a period of utter destruction, humiliation and defeat.

Ezekiel himself is one of these exiles; and along with Second Isaiah, his is one of the great prophetic voices of this almost-fifty-year period in a foreign land. As the years wear on, Ezekiel witnesses first hand the soul of his people, gradually withering and dying, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones.

**Can these bones live?**

### IV.

This vision is no less relevant for us today as we moderns endure our own experience of dry bones, both literally and metaphorically.

In a world where the drumbeat of war seems unending ...

- a world with people, hungry for freedom, fleeing the menacing wrath and violence of ruthless dictators and authoritarian regimes ...
- a world with displaced persons in mounting numbers ...
- a world with wrenching, destructive natural disasters (Japan) ...

In such a world, where the valleys of the earth overflow with dry bones, God asks us, too, ***Can these bones live?***

And here at home, where greed and politics seem to polarize us more everyday ...

- where the money arrangements and tax codes—however complex or simple—always favor the rich and the powerful ...
- where the profits of Wall Street leap off the charts while, at the same time—every day—the middle class shrinks just a little more ...

In our world, too, where the dry bones of yesterday's gloom seem to be piling up, the Spirit comes and asks again, ***Can these bones live?*** Can we learn how to live together, to govern together ... and to move further into this new century together?

## V.

And God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to these bones, saying,

***Thus says the Lord God to these bones:  
I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.***

This is the same breath, the same *ruah*, or spirit, that God breathed into Adam and Eve in the garden of creation. This is the *life force* of the universe that we're talking about.

***Prophesy to the breath,*** says God,  
***... come from the four winds, O breath,  
... and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.***

This same breath is breathed into Lazarus in the *raising of Lazarus* in John's gospel. It's the breath of life, the breath of hope ... the breath that takes the wings of the morning and stretches them to the farthest reaches of the sea with the affirmation:

***I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.***

This is God's hope for the world. It is God's vision for every human being ... for every community, however run down; for every family, however defeated.

## VI.

So, what do we do? As Christians, what do we do to honor the spirit that is within us, so the valleys of dry bones around us might experience a rebirth to new life and new hope?

In a column from a few years back on *what works* in our troubled communities, **Leonard Pitts Jr.** gives us a glimpse ... a glimpse of how the dry bones of poverty and human desolation can have life breathed back in them and can, indeed, *live again*.

It's about the transformation of **East Lake Meadows**, a formerly run down, crime ravaged area of Atlanta. At the time, to an outside observer, **East Lake** seemed like a war zone. Check out these daunting numbers:

- Crime – 18 times the national average
- Per family income - \$4,000 a year
- 60% of the household on welfare
- 75% dropout rate in the schools

- The average family could expect to be the victim of an average of 3 felonies/ year
- Only 5% of the children could pass the state math test
- The *employment* rate (not unemployment) was 14%

This was all before the **East Lake Foundation** was launched by **Tom Cousins**, a wealthy developer and frustrated philanthropist. Stunned by a New York Times report that 70% of the men in the state's prison system came from just eight neighborhoods in the city, when he checked into it, he found it was the same in Atlanta. Thus, the beginning of what became known as **Cousin's mission project** to transform hell.

You should see **East Lake** now, some years later: everything has changed. New construction is everywhere: apartment buildings, schools, recreation facilities and playgrounds ... a total overhaul ... along with all kinds of education and training programs ...

One half of the apartments in **East Lake** are rented at market rates to middle-income people. The other half are rented to low-income families who are required to pay no more than 30% of their income, however much that may be. Integrating these groups of middle and lower class together, it turns out, is one of the keys to the project's success. Check out the numbers now:

- 74% of the kids now pass the state math test ...
- Crime is down 87%, violent crime down 95% ...
- Just 5% of the residents are now on welfare, all of them elderly or disabled ...
- Per family income is now at \$18,000 ...

## VII.

**Can these bones live?** Can yesterday's darkness turn into hope for today and beyond?

The answer, of course, is a resounding YES. God gives new life and new hope through the faith conviction and the acts of compassion and love of each one of us. As Christians, we are called to believe in the power of LOVE to transform the world.

And it does—in and through us.

When Jesus saw Mary's tears—because her brother, Lazarus, was dead—and the depth of her sadness and sorrow, Jesus, too, wept. And the Jews commented: *See how he loved him.* It's the love that matters.

And then, approaching the tomb where Lazarus was buried, Jesus said, *Take away the stone.* And then, looking to the heavens, he prayed and then cried out with a loud voice, ***Lazarus, come out!***

And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth. And Jesus said to them, *Unbind him and let him go.*

And through the prophet, Ezekiel, God said:

***And you shall know that I am the Lord,  
when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people ...  
and I will put my spirit with you, and you shall live.***

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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