



Fifth Sunday of Lent  
Light of Christ Anglican Church  
The Rev. Michael J. Moffitt  
March 26, 2023

*Jesus Is the Resurrection and the Life*

Text: [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

I was born and raised in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Some of my fondest memories are of times spent with Teresa and our children Amy and Ben hiking along the Appalachian Trail or climbing to the top of Sharp Top Mountain at the Peaks of Otter, looking out over Roanoke Valley from McAfee's Knob or seeing the amazing beauty and grandeur of Roanoke and Giles County up upon Dragon's tooth. I've seen a lot of beautiful places around our country and the world. Nothing moved me like the Blue Ridge even though other places had their own beauty they didn't feel like home. I remember once when I flew over the Arabian Desert and couldn't imagine what it would be like to live there. There was nothing but sand and barrenness as far as the eye could see. I assume that those who grew up there consider it home, not me.

Last week as I considered our passage in Ezekiel 37, I wondered about the prophet's life at the time of the vision that God gave him. During this time, he was in exile in Babylon around 700 miles from his beloved Jerusalem where the temple lay in ruins. He was around 26 years old when he went into exile with the others who had lived in Jerusalem and his wife died during that time. He lived in Nippur which was in the Middle Euphrates region of Iraq. I suspect that in his mind's eye he remembered the beauty of the Kidron Valley and the awesome temple where God once dwelt. All that he had known and loved was gone. You probably remember Psalm 137:1-3,

*By the waters of Babylon there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the Willows there we hung our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*

There is one principle that we learn at the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel. Even though a prophet of God, faithful to God in his calling to Israel he was still exiled along with those in Israel who had not been faithful. Being a follower of Jesus Christ does not exempt us from the judgment that God renders upon a nation. When there are blessings from God for obedience and when there are curses poured out for sin we also experience what is happening.

God reveals to his prophet what he is going to do and he does so through a vision. Ezekiel in this vision of the valley of dry bones would have been repulsed by it. As a priest he would not have been allowed to touch a human corpse and yet God in the Spirit leads him around and among the remains of so many dead so that he can see two things about them.

First, he sees that there were enough skeletons to make up "*an exceedingly great army*" (verse 10). It was evident that this had been a battle scene where thousands of people had died.

Secondly, the bones were very dry, which means they had been there for a long time. The birds and animals had picked the bones clean, and the sun had bleached them white. There was no way to recognize the individuals that they once were, just dry bones in a valley.

What would have been very disturbing to Ezekiel was the fact that they were unburied, which was a sign of being cursed in ancient near eastern culture. Proper burial was not just for the sake of the family or friends; to

not be buried was considered a guarantee of the continuance of suffering in the afterlife. It was a sign of ultimate humiliation and to Israel it was a sign of God's judgment for disobedience. In Deuteronomy 28:25–26 God warned Israel against turning away from his commands,

*The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away.*

These bones were not only the evidence that the victims had died in battle, but they had fallen under divine judgment.

God turns to Ezekiel and asks, *“Son of man, can these bones live?”* There was nothing to restore, there were only bones. I suspect that he assumed that God was asking the question for a good reason and so his answer is brilliant, *“O Lord God, you know.”* Ezekiel knew that God was not like the gods of other nations who were not gods at all. He was the creator God who ruled and reigned over the living and the dead. One of the earliest poems of the Hebrew Bible was Deuteronomy 32:39,

*“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.”*

The Psalmist declared in 104:29–30,

*When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.*

Ezekiel knew that it was certainly within the power of God to revive the dead but still these were dry bones. His answer leaves room for God to act according to his power but it wouldn't be because Ezekiel had the faith to believe it a possibility. It's at this point that God spoke again asking that Ezekiel act in faith in speaking his word.

*Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."*

This was very different from the other times when God had sent him to proclaim his word to the living who were stiff-necked, hard-hearted and disobedient but alive. Then God instructs him as to what he is to say to the dry bones,

*Thus says the Lord God to these bones: "Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord."*

In obedience to the command of God, he spoke the very same words that God gave him. No incantations, no special ceremony, just the simple command of God to the bones, causing the most amazing thing to happen right in front of him. The living power of the word of the living God who rules with all power and authority enters into the valley of the shadow of death and the transformation is immediate. There is the sound of bones once again being perfectly joined together and then sinew, flesh and skin covers the bones but there was a problem. Though they are now covered with flesh there was no breath in them, no life, and no movement. They are still lifeless corpses and if something doesn't happen soon the vultures will

be back for round two. Then God speaks for the 3rd time and commands the prophet to speak in obedience once more to His command:

*“Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.*

It is important here to note that the Hebrew word for breath is the same word used for wind and for Spirit in verses one and fourteen. As a matter of fact, this word used ten times in our text this morning is very significant.

At the beginning and end of our section it refers to the Spirit of God who first lifts Ezekiel and brings him into the valley of dry bones and at the end the Spirit of God that will bring the people of God back to their own land and this is how they will know that God is the Lord. In verses 5, 6, 8, and 10 it literally means breath, as in breathing to live. It also has this meaning in verse 9 but in the last part of that verse through the prophetic word Ezekiel is to command, *“come from the four winds O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”*

In this case breath has the dual function of speaking the command from the Spirit of the living God who then imparts the breath of life that causes the corpses to come alive again. From the very beginning in Genesis, it was the Spirit of God who breathed life into Adam made from dust, yet inanimate. He was given life when God breathed into his nostrils. Here in Ezekiel’s vision the life-giving power of the creator God once more breathes life into the lifeless bodies and once more brings the miracle of new existence. Then finally in verses 11–14 the whole point of the vision is made clear.

God's people were in despair as their beloved city, Jerusalem, had not only fallen into the hands of their enemy, but had been destroyed. The temple of the Lord built by Solomon now lay in ruins. The exiles were without hope of restoration, and it seemed as unlikely as bones being brought back to life. Being exiled in a pagan land was to them a living death, it would be better to be in a cemetery. All of these feelings are summed up in verse 11, *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.*

It's here that God through Ezekiel finally speaks words of hope and as is often true in a vision the scenery changes. Instead of the valley of dry bones, Ezekiel now sees Israel as buried in the graves of exile. God promises,

*"Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel."*

Though they had rejected God he still calls them *"my people."* He would bring them back to life in their own land and they would be resurrected from the death of exile and would once again have opportunity to become the mighty army of God. They would know that this had happened by the mighty word and spirit of Yahweh, the only true and living God. What kind of love is this? Have you ever stopped to consider how often Israel turned away from God and even boldly, arrogantly, worshipped other gods in His temple? Yet he longed to restore them and call them his people. God has not changed, he still longs for reconciliation with his people. 1 John 3:1 captures this,

*"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are...."*

Some have considered the passage from Ezekiel as speaking of the final resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, but I don't believe that's the

point that God was making here. Ezekiel's vision and interpretation were initially to bring hope back to Israel as a people and were not intended to teach the doctrine of bodily resurrection. Instead, it was comparing their restoration to bringing back life to dry bones in hope that they would see the power and glory of God.

They needed to accept that their exile was deserved because they had in essence chosen death in exile to covenant faithfulness with God. They had been warned repeatedly by the prophets that this would be how God brought judgment upon their rebellion. Hopefully this time of exile would wake them up to the reality of the consequences of their sins. Hopefully when God acted to miraculously set them free and restore them to life, they would see it as new life coming out of death, the miracle of resurrection and they would respond with gratefulness to the God who had shown such commitment and faithfulness to them.

Ezekiel most likely would not have seen this vision in the fuller sense of God's story of His redemption of the world but as we have already seen there is a correlation between God breathing life into the dry bones that had been given flesh and God's breathing life into the lifeless form of the man created from dust at creation.

We see the best representation of this story in Christ Jesus himself. On the very evening of his resurrection, he comes into a locked room and in John 20:22, *He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'* The Lord of life who had just risen from the bones of the dead adopts the same posture of God himself by commanding the breath of the Spirit to come upon His disciples.

The disciples would come to realize that what God had done through Jesus the Messiah was exactly what they had hoped that God would do for

Israel. Everything that Israel and indeed all of creation had longed for was now accomplished for those who would believe in and follow him, Jews, and Gentiles alike. For those who refused to follow Jesus, they would be just like the dry bones, lifeless and without hope.

The breath that breathed life into the dead came from *the four winds*, teaching us that the Spirit of God is working everywhere in the world, in all directions. The same resurrecting power that brought life to the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision and then to the dead body of Jesus in the tomb, is the same power that is available to the ends of the earth to bring life, salvation and hope of bodily resurrection to all who trust in the one who sends it.

In today's gospel reading Jesus hears that his friend Lazarus was very sick, and his sisters Mary and Martha sent for him to come. Jesus upon hearing of this said, *"This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* He deliberately stays where he is for two more days before he goes to Bethany. When he arrives he is told that Lazarus died and was placed in the tomb four days earlier. Why would Jesus have waited the additional two days before going to Bethany? Clearly by the time Jesus had received word of Lazarus' illness he was already dead, but Jesus knew what he was going to do and in order for God to receive the full glory, he needed to wait the additional time.

Dr. Rod Whitaker explains in his commentary on John's gospel.

Jesus arrives and finds that Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. Burials normally took place on the day of the death (cf. Acts 5:6–10), so he has been dead for four days. For Jews this probably signifies that Lazarus is clearly dead and beginning to decay. A later Jewish text that cites an authority

from the early third century A.D. says the mourners should continue to come to the tomb for three days because the dead person continues to be present. Mourning is at its height on the third day, presumably because it is the last time the dead person will be present there. "Bar Kappara taught: Until three days [after death] the soul keeps on returning to the grave, thinking that it will go back [into the body]; but when it sees that the facial features have become disfigured, it departs and abandons it [the body]." Thus, the reference to the fourth day may be quite significant for setting the scene for another dramatic miracle.

Upon arriving in Bethany both Martha and Mary profess that if Jesus had been there their brother would not have died. He responds to Martha,

*"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."*

As Jesus, Martha, Mary, and the crowd of mourners go to the tomb Jesus requests that they roll away the stone. Mary replies that Lazarus has been dead for four days and by now there will be an awful odor due to the inevitable decay of the body. Jesus replies, *"Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"*

Jesus needs to publicly declare his relationship with the Father so that the crowds can hear and remember this event. He told them to remove the stone that was sealing the tomb and he lifts up his eyes and thanks his Father for hearing him. He then cries out,

*"Lazarus, come out!" The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him and let him go."*

As we consider the story from John 11:1–44 it is evident that Jesus was being very intentional from the time he heard of Lazarus being ill to the scene at the tomb. He was removing all doubt that he was the promised Messiah and this miracle revealed the same power and authority that was so clear in the vision given to Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. Jesus cries out to a dead body, *"Lazarus, come out"* which made about as much sense as Ezekiel by God's command crying out to dry bones and yet Lazarus comes out of the tomb alive, and they remove the grave clothes from him. This event was a clear indication to those who could hear and see it for what it was—the promise of the prophet like Moses from [Deuteronomy 18:15](#). Jesus did what only he could do but it had very little to do with Lazarus needing to be restored to life. It was clearly a gift to Mary, and Martha as Lazarus' sisters who probably looked to him for their financial well-being. This joyous gift was temporary as Lazarus died again. The scripture doesn't tell us anything about how he died and there are conflicting stories. However we can be very sure of one thing—he did die again.

This whole episode was to demonstrate that Jesus had authority over sickness, nature, demonic forces and every physical abnormality but also had authority over death.

So what is our response to this story and the vision of Ezekiel? Do we merely tuck the information away in our minds in case it ever comes up in a conversation or should we be curious about what it has to do with us? When Ezekiel spoke the words of God the transformation of the dry bones

began and when he called on the Spirit of God to breathe on them they came fully alive.

What if we who have been given the Word of God and been indwelt by his Holy Spirit chose to speak God's word and call upon His Spirit on behalf of those around us who are the walking dead? What about those who look to be alive but inside feel empty and spiritually dead? This word is for them and for us who long to see the glory of God displayed now and in the future.

There has been a lot of talk recently about revival. What does revival look like? Is it an amazing supernatural display of miracles? It could be. It wouldn't be unprecedented, we've heard stories. Or would it be that God's people are raised from their lethargy and begin to move according to the word of God already spoken through the Scriptures? I think that to be the most likely. I'm ready for it and am asking God to move in power through us. There has never been a greater need for God's people to move in obedience. I'm praying into that, and I hope you will join me.

Let's pray.

©2023 The Rev. Michael J. Moffitt