

## Can These Bones Live?

By: Meagan McLaughlin

March 29, 2020. The readings today include the Valley of Dry Bones from Ezekiel, and Jesus raising Lazarus to life from the Gospel of John. Pastor Meagan preaches on these texts, on the death that is already happening in our world with the pandemic we are facing, and the life anew that we know is coming from the breath of God.

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

Twice, I've been present in the room at the moment when someone took their last breath. Stood at the bedside, waiting and watching, holding hands, praying and singing, as breath by breath, life slipped away. In both cases, I and those I stood vigil with listened closely, wondering which breath would be the last one — this, or this, or this. In the end, when the final breath was released, we collectively held our own breaths until we were sure: the final exhale had indeed signaled the end of this unique life in human form, the body still warm, but quickly cooling.

The bones God leads Ezekiel to in that valley have no warmth. There is no indication that they ever had breath, and for my money, if I were the betting type, no hope that they would ever breathe again. It's kind of like the feeling I would get being out in our yard in Minneapolis, after the snow melted, but before any buds had popped or grass had appeared. It just doesn't seem possible that life could return, it all looks so dead, twigs and sticks and brown.

If I had been Ezekiel, I might have said, "No way!" in response to the question of whether these bones can live. "Are we looking at the same thing? Not possible." And Mary and the other mourners say basically the same thing to Jesus, when he says he wants to take the stone away from Lazarus' tomb. "It's going to smell! He's been in there for four days!"

Jesus persists, because he knows something that the others don't know. Even when death is so final that you can smell it, when breath has been gone for so long that the bones are literally dry, God can still bring life.

The winds, the Spirit, moves, in concert with Ezekiel's prophecy, and the breath enters the bones and they live! When the stone is rolled away from Lazarus' tomb, we have to imagine the stench of certain death was terrible, and yet in response to Jesus' cry — Lazarus, come out — Lazarus comes!

My family of faith, the pandemic that we are facing is like the stench of death from Lazarus' tomb, or the rattle of bones from Ezekiel's valley, or the brown, lifeless branches in my yard before spring begins. Signs of death, undeniably. Death is already happening, and beloveds, there will be more before this passes.

And, the Spirit is still at work. The wind is blowing, ready to bring life out of the bones that have no flesh left on them. The stone is rolled away, waiting for Lazarus to step out into the fresh air. In our yard here in South City, our cats are discovering every green blade, all the new plants they've never seen before.

This coming of life is not a passive thing. We human beings living this human life are invited to be active, breathing participants in the life-giving movement of the Spirit around us. God asks Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” and he says, in effect, “I don’t know, can they?” And God says, “Prophecy to these bones. Tell the winds, breathe on these bones, and they might have life.” In other words, claim the promise, Ezekiel, and proclaim the promise, that God brings life where we can only see death.

Lazarus’ sisters, and their gathered community, are invited to participate in Lazarus’ re-birth by unbinding him. Letting go of old ideas perhaps of who he was, letting go of grief, opening their minds to receive the new life that stood before them.

We, too are invited to witness to death, family of faith, as Ezekiel did in the Valley of Dry Bones, as the mourners gathered smelled death at Lazarus’ tomb. God witnesses with us all the griefs we experience, all the losses we bear now, and those yet to come — not as a passive observer, but weeping alongside us, as Jesus wept for his friend, Lazarus.

We, too, are invited into the promises of the living God, family of faith. We, too, are invited to prophecy with Ezekiel, to join the mourners in unbinding new life when it appears.

And when we are the dry bones, when we are sealed in a tomb as dead as Lazarus, the community here gathered prophecies to you, and for you, and unbinds you, that you might find life again. Because we can’t always see it for ourselves, in the midst of the tomb, in the midst of the valley. I don’t know about you, but I suspect I am not alone in having experienced dryness the last couple of weeks. I will confess to having had a temper tantrum over a minor inconvenience a few days ago, to having felt overwhelmed by all the changes we have been asked to make in a brief two weeks, to having felt the helplessness of wondering how my family is, from a distance, as I know many of you have as well. Anyone else felt dry, keenly aware of fear and grief and tiredness this week?

And yet, I have also felt the wind blowing, and the Spirit moving. Your worship team gathered, and a new life entered into our imaginings about how to celebrate Holy Week and Easter together, while we are still physically apart. Our youngest cat figured out he can climb the wooden fence in our yard, much to his delight and our chagrin. A neighbor down the block hosted her own block concert this week, with a professional sound system set up on her porch. My brother’s family posted a photo of their family taking a run together in their neighborhood. A mentor sent me a link to an acapella recording of “It is Well” that brought tears to my eyes. And all of you, family of faith, are caring for one another so well, in these days.

When we are dry and can’t speak, we prophecy to one another, proclaiming that we know the breath of God will come, bringing life anew, however that looks, on the other side, whenever that is. Family of faith, no matter what happens, life is coming. We are here, and so is God, and we are in this together. Life is coming!

Family of faith, God is whispering to us, “Mortal, can these bones live?” What is your answer this morning?

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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