

South Dakota Synod Assembly, Closing Worship, May 30, 2009  
Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Preacher: Frederick J. Gaiser

### **Can These Bones Live?**

How do we develop the biblical literacy that we talk about so much these days? In a variety of ways, no doubt, and many of us may have learned today's story the same way the African American slaves did—slaves who had little or no access to written Scripture, but who did have access to song and celebration. So they sang this text and celebrated it. Can't you just see those scattered bones come together as you hear the song? Foot bone connected to the ankle bone; ankle bone connected to the shin bone; shin bone connected to the knee bone; knee bone connected to the thigh bone, oh hear the word of the Lord!

It wasn't an anatomy lesson; it was a Bible lesson: God's word makes dead things live. Here was Holy Scripture, sung into life by slaves in the face of those who would use that same Scripture to justify the system of death that held the singers in bondage. A great song, a great lesson, which gives the answer to God's question that Ezekiel could not: Can these bones live? Ezekiel was too close to the killing fields, to the bones of his people scattered in the desert wasteland by the Babylonian conquerors. Can these bones live? Of course not! Can the bones of my people live? Impossible!

And we know it, too. Dead bones can't live! Can the dry bones in the cemetery live? Can the skeletal bones over in the biology lab live? Of course not.

It may be that we have heard the spiritual so often—"Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk around"—that we take for granted that they can. Or we know the answer has to be yes, because, after all, we're in church.

But the plain, commonsense, nose-on-your-face answer is no. Dead bones can't live—

because they can't! Nor can any other dead stuff. That reality places the ultimate limit on us and all creation: death happens, and dead things can't live.

Unless they can, of course, and that radical impossibility is pretty much what Christian faith is about. What *is* Christian faith about? What is the Christian church about? As Christians, we can get all bent out of shape about things that more or less matter, or we can get caught up in some things that don't matter much at all—so much so that we sometimes forget the one thing that finally does matter and that unites us despite all differences: once a guy was dead and now he isn't!

That is the core of Christian faith, without which nothing else matters. Paul said it directly: "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain" (1 Cor 15:14). That is why some have argued that Christianity is not really a religion at all, not a system, not a culture, not a philosophy, not a way of life, it's just news: once a guy was dead, and now he's not. Even if that dismissal of religion is too simplistic, and it is, if that *news* is true, it changes everything.

Death is like Einstein's notion that nothing can travel faster than light. It's an ultimate limit. Here and no farther. The end. Period. Science fiction can't stand the speed-of-light limit, so it invents a variety of ways to get around it in order to introduce us to aliens, Star Wars, and new worlds where no one has gone before. And the human psyche can't stand the limit of death, so we develop mechanisms to cope with it, myths to suppress it, religions to smooth it over, and the many aspects of our cosmetic world that deny it. But if all of human experience and biological science gets it right, you can't get there from here—from death to life. Can these bones live? No. A resounding no.

Unless they can. That is biblical faith. Not a religious journey that will help you find

meaning through correct theology or rich spirituality or the strength of your moral character, no matter how valuable those things might be. The point is simply this: Jesus was dead, and now he's not. If that is true, everything changes. Jesus lives, and everything is transformed. As interesting, expanding, limiting, and defining as everything about our human lives might be, it finally has nothing to do with the truth of the central Christian announcement: Jesus lives. I can't make that happen by doing religion right, having enough faith, being more spiritual than the next guy, joining the right church or the right club or the right political party, by being the right nationality or ethnic group or color or having the right sexual orientation. I don't make this happen. Once Jesus was dead, and now he's not. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself (2 Corinthians 5:19 KJV). If true, that changes everything about me and my world, and we are brought to a new place where lives and systems and religions and cultures, even synods, can be transformed.

In our text, Ezekiel receives this marvelous and impossible vision that dead bones might rise and walk. Not because anybody deserves it or because people contain some immortal divine spark, but simply because God—and only God—can bring life out of nothing. Might we somehow tinker in our laboratories long enough to get amino acids to start walking around? Who knows, but we won't make life out of nothing. And we won't make dead bones come to life. Cloning doesn't count. God has something better in store for us than Jurassic Park. God promises nothing less than to make all things new (Revelation 21:5), and the clearest and most impossible fulfillment of that is in these claims: Dead Israel lives! Jesus lives!

Ezekiel's vision is more than an ancient history lesson for us. We can't get to the New Testament and to Jesus without it. The dead bones in Ezekiel's valley are Israel—God's chosen people, God's experiment to restore the earth and bring all people back to God's own self and

God's own place. But Israel is dead. The experiment failed. It's six hundred years before Christ, and Babylon, the dreaded enemy, is trampling all over the bones of Israel and the ruins of God's city and God's temple, now become nothing but a haunt of jackals. Scorched earth. Dead earth. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.

Can these bones live? Of course not. That is, not on their own. But can God who, in the beginning, created life out of nothing create life anew, even here? Yes, says God. Yes, sees Ezekiel. Not for the sake of anybody's righteousness, but only for the sake of God's steadfast love, in order that God's experiment will not fail. And it is this new creation, witnessed in our text by Ezekiel, that, more than anything in Old Testament history, feeds the development in Israel of the new idea of death and resurrection. Death and resurrection not because anything can live again on its own, but death and resurrection because God can and will make all things new.

Both parts of the death and resurrection equation are essential. Resurrection, new life, new beginning—obviously essential, because without it there is no tomorrow for ancient Israel and no today for us; for if there had been no ongoing existence of God's people, there would have been no New Testament, no Jesus of Nazareth, no Christian church, no ELCA, no South Dakota synod, no us sitting here today. Make no mistake: no rebirth of Israel in 600 BC, no us in 2009 AD—at least, not us as a Christian church.

But the death side of the equation is essential as well. Israel discovered, largely through this event, that the only way to a genuinely transformed new life is through death to the old. Life out of death. Find yourself by losing yourself. Purging the old to make way for the new. Death to the comfortable assumption that being God's chosen people assures reward and requires no sacrifice, no response. This experience, this death and resurrection of Israel, inspires and feeds the New Testament hope of life after death, a hope confirmed by God's resurrection of Jesus on

Easter morning. Once a guy was dead, and now he's not. Once Jesus was dead, but now he's alive. Christian faith, Christian hope, in a nutshell.

And for us? Can these bones live? Personally and individually, we live with this hope because of God's promise in Christ. Can my bones live? Can those of my tragically lost spouse or children? Can those of our parents and grandparents, our ancestors in the faith? Not on their own, but, yes, in Christ. For in Christ all things are made new. The promise by which we live.

And what of our church? Our life together as God's people? Are we not in danger of going the way of ancient Israel, whistling down the lonely path to dusty death? In danger of going out not like Israel, with a bang, but with a whimper, simply fading away into irrelevance? We are threatened now with extinction by a secular world little interested in traditional Christian faith, threatened with strangulation by an economy that steals the lives of our congregations and institutions, threatened because our old ways of being church seem no longer to work in this brave new world. And worse, threatened internally by our propensity to favoring fights over faith, to tearing ourselves apart over things that more or less matter but are not the heart of the matter.

Certainly, the threats are real. Can these bones live, some twenty-six centuries after Ezekiel's question about ancient Israel? Can we live? Not on our own, to be sure. Not because we can will to make it so. Can we live? Maybe Ezekiel's answer is the only one that makes sense: God, only you know. But we do know God's desire for us: life. We know that God promises to be present and to work wonders through the proclamation of the gospel. So if we *can* get to tomorrow as a church, it will only be through faith in that promise, faith that God can indeed renew us and transform us; so we pray for the gift of faith that can open the door to God's tomorrow. But that might mean death to some of our pet notions, death to our sometime failure

to love those with whom we disagree—on whatever side of whatever issue—and perhaps even harder, to honor the integrity of their positions; death to our comfortable assurance that we pretty well have figured out how to be the kingdom of God on earth, death to whatever arrogant rigidities and certainties block our finding a way forward that is both appropriately humble and faithfully bold.

This Pentecost, the wind of the Spirit wants to blow away the cobwebs that close our minds and hearts and the doors of our churches to anything new and to create life. Nineteenth-century Christian preacher and poet George MacDonald once wrote:

Who trusts in God, [that] heart with life doth swell;

Faith opens all the windows to God's wind.<sup>1</sup>

Do we not wish for that: to trust in God and open all the windows to God's wind? To clear out the musty smells of old lives, old habits, old fights, old hurts, old grudges, old sins and to experience the new, sweet, fresh, cool air of the Spirit of God? Surely, this is God's desire as well, and God wants to open the windows of our hearts and minds and churches to this new wind.

We know how that can happen, because Ezekiel tells us. Let the wind blow, says God to the prophet, and turn that wind-Spirit loose by proclaiming my living word to these dead bones. Wind and word, Spirit and gospel—these alone can produce the life that Jesus commends to us and our church: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). A challenging observation! Will the people of South Dakota look at us and recognize us as Jesus' disciples because of our evident love for one another? We won't get

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<sup>1</sup>George MacDonald, *Diary of an Old Soul: 366 Writings for Devotional Reflection* (1880; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994) 81. (MacDonald wrote, “...his heart with life doth swell.”)

that done on our own either, but God can get it done through the same transforming word and Spirit that stirred Ezekiel's old dead bones.

Will the new winds blow? Can these bones live? God says yes, and we pray for eyes to see and for faith—that perfect divine gift—to open all our windows. AMEN