

Bones¹
April 10, 2011
Rev. Tadd Allman-Morton

The pictures were shocking; just so hard to wrap your head around. They were like a nightmare come to vivid life. The scale was vast and terrible. Multi-storied building after multi-storied building had folded in on itself. The spines of the structures had twisted and snapped; often in many places, making once straight lines almost spiral. The ribs of the fallen floors were flayed out—some one way, some another. Other buildings lay in heaps, piled sideways or flipped over fully, ripped clear from foundations.

Cracks ran through everything. Curving lines of debris bore witness to the unimaginable waves which had dragged many out to deep and watery endings. Cars were thrown about like abandoned children's toys, sometimes out of context entirely—on buildings, or standing on end.

Formerly busy public squares were devoid of bustle, now filled only with the scattered skeletons of hulking downtown remnants. Like graveyards at midnight, towns and cities were shown in page after page, and picture after picture to be empty, broken, dried up...

Can these bones live?

Cynthia was one of the cool moms. She had the kind of house where young people felt welcome and respected. We actually talked with her, too. They were not your stereotypical family. Over the years there were different men in Cynthia's life. The whole family had artistic and musical leanings. Neither son was a star athlete or class leader in a conventional way, but they had plenty of friends.

As her boys grew they abandoned the world of pure imagination slowly but surely. Building back yard forts gave way to thinking of moving out and having their own homes. Their artistic ways stayed with them, changing and growing as they did. The sons became young men and went to college. The younger one found a focus pretty quickly. The older one, Ian, was more restless. He tried some of this and then some of that—floating more freely through different experiences. He didn't always make the best choices, but he had a good heart.

¹ Many thanks to my Tuesday Clergy Bible Study Group and the book series *Feasting on the Word* for many formative insights, and one catchy phrase, that led to this sermon.

His passing away was as unexpected as it was sudden. Cynthia told me she was gaining a new understanding of how Christ's mother must have dealt with losing *her* son. She felt shaken... empty... pared down to a skeleton...without hope.

Can these bones live?

They were many hundreds of miles away from their homeland and kept there against their will. Added to all that, they had been forced to abandon their beloved Temple. And it was not left whole. It had been twisted and snapped and folded in on itself. Then they were forced to leave their homeland and serve their conquerors.

It had been a long and hard journey. Each step away from Judea and Jerusalem left them feeling less and less whole. Each step closer to Babylon meant another step toward being forced to serve the desires of the people who had overrun their land and taken them captive...another step away from being a free people in their own land...another step toward a living death. Why would the God who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt *now* deliver them into this fresh hell, this new life of pain and estrangement? They felt utterly destroyed...pared down to almost nothing...and scattered.

Can these bones live?

It is a question we all ask at one time or another. There are so many moments in our lives when we feel beaten down and near to death, or even dead although walking and breathing still. Can these bones live? This morning it is also a question from the depths of a vision. "Can these bones live?" God is asking it of the prophet Ezekiel in the middle of their mystical encounter. This is not a bright lights and jubilation sort of mystical moment. There is no sense of uplift here, no inspiring rapture, no trumpets and songs of celebration—just Ezekiel and God and a valley.

God shows Ezekiel around it. It is full of bones. The Biblical Hebrew is not well represented here in English. Our text says only that Ezekiel was shown "all around them..." and that "there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry."² But I am led to believe that being shown all around the bones would better be expressed by saying that Ezekiel was shown the bones in minute detail, and likely more than once. This is part of why he knows that they were very dry, because he got a close up inspection. And they were beyond his counting. The full impact of all those lost souls scattered around him was made plain. So, surrounded by bones...surrounded by the dead, God asks that odd question: "can these bones live?"

² Ezekiel 37:2, adapted.

Ezekiel is no fool. Even in the midst of a nightmare vision he gives a collected and wise reply: “Oh Lord God, *you know*.”³ Ezekiel doesn’t pretend to have any special knowledge of life and death. After all those matters rest securely in God’s hands, whatever we may think about them. God has a strange reply. He asks Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones—to tell them what to do in God’s name. Ezekiel tells the bones that God “will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. (God) will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live...”⁴

Ezekiel does as God asks of him and before his eyes, following a great rattling sound, bone joins to bone, sinews re-grow and skin, too. Suddenly, once anonymous piles of bones reassemble themselves into being the precious human lives that God had made. Following a second prophecy, God’s breath is called from all the directions to fill their lungs and bring them into full life—breath and flesh, sinew and bones knit together to live anew.

Now as visions go, this is already a potent demonstration of God’s power, right? But then it gets more specific and more powerful. God says to Ezekiel:

“Mortal, these bones *are the whole house of Israel*. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say *to them*, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves... I will bring you back to the land of Israel... I will put my spirit *within you*, and you *shall live*.”⁵

Friends—you, too, are part of the house of Israel! Israel means “one who wrestles with God”⁶—that is to say *people of faith*, and we *are* those people. So this news is for *us* as well as for Ezekiel and his more immediate family and descendants. God knows that we sometimes feel dried up. God knows that sometimes we feel without hope. Sometimes, God knows, we feel cut off from God completely.

But hear this good news—God doesn’t put us there and God will not leave us there! God is creator, but never destroyer. God made the good green earth but does not send earthquakes and giant waves to harm us. Those are actions of an earth which moves on its own schedule. But God does work in the hearts and lives of the people who seek to help the broken whenever such tragic events unfold. God creates human lives but does not seek to end any. More often than not poor human choices lead to untimely demises. Otherwise they are unforeseeable consequences of the randomness which runs through all life. But God does give us one another with whom to find comfort in the face of our losses, and God’s Spirit is present in all such Holy encounters. God does not use one group of people to punish or exile any other group of people. Not now, not

³ Ezekiel 37:3.

⁴ Ezekiel 37:5-7.

⁵ Ezekiel 37:11-12, 14.

in the ancient past, not even if we wished it to be true—not *ever*. But God does send visions to remind us that God’s holy work is about restoring people, bringing new life, healing and granting wholeness and shalom even in the face of suffering.

Can these bones live? With God *all things* are possible!⁶ Remember *that* whenever you encounter suffering in your life—God promises us restoration—in this life and even beyond. Can these bones live? With God *all things are possible!* Hold on to *that* whenever you feel dried up, hopeless, or cut off! Can these bones live? God says yes, yes, a thousand times yes!

Amen?!

⁶ See Matthew 19:26.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6I will lay sinews on 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." 7So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' 12Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.