

# Sermon for April 2, 2017 – “New Vision, New Hope, New Life”

Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year A – Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

## Westwood First Presbyterian Church

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In the prophet Ezekiel’s vision, the Israelite exiles are lamenting the fact that their bones have dried up. Their hope is gone. And God has abandoned them. Ever felt that way? Do you feel that way right now? We’re more like these ancient Israelites than we may care to admit. There are those impossible things we meet with resignation. We reject them out of hand, refusing to entertain the notion of hope for reversal or transformation. We despair because we’ve lost something we’re desperate to regain. Or we despair, **not** because we’re hopeful that things could be otherwise but because they’re so radically different from the way things ought to be or the way we **think** they ought to be. The valley of dry bones is what we know. So: the resuscitation of dry bones, the raising of Lazarus...What do we make of these things? What do these stories teach us?

As a nation, Israel has lost everything essential to nationhood; their king, their temple, their independence and above all, their land. Ezekiel is prophet and priest. He’s trying to make sense of the exile in which God’s people find themselves. It’s the same with us. We desperately need to make sense of those things that cause us to despair, things like death, suffering and abandonment. So, when God leads Ezekiel through the valley of dead bones, how ironic is it that God is the one asking: “**Mortal, can these bones live?**” Shouldn’t God be the one the one answering questions? God taunts Ezekiel with an impossible task: “prophesy to these bones!” In other words, proclaim a message to the dead. What?!?! Why should Ezekiel waste his breath? What’s the point? If the people didn’t listen when they were alive why would they listen now that they’re dead? Ezekiel’s task is to restore hope to a grief-stricken, cynical, lost people. He’s to risk faith. Even with his own attitude of stunned disbelief, he’s summoned to prophesy, to speak God’s word. Not because there’s no tension between despair and hope, but precisely because it’s so severe. Israel’s miserable history, what brought them to this sorry state, is what makes Ezekiel’s task so daunting. But it’s not up to Ezekiel. God alone can resurrect these bones; God **alone** is Israel’s hope. God alone is **our** hope.

Resurrection, new life, occurs by the power of God’s Spirit. “**Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.**” Think of the creation story: “**Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.**” If Israel is to have any future at all it’s only because of God’s Spirit. By this Spirit, they’d become a nation. But now what’s happened? Has God withdrawn His Spirit from Israel? Has God abandoned them? To all appearances that seemed to be the case. Israel certainly thought so. It’s not that Israel hadn’t given God sufficient reason to do so? But the truth is that God did not! Likewise, God’s not withdrawn His Spirit from the Church. God’s Spirit is, as it has always been, the source of hope for God’s people in all places and times. The Spirit is the engine, what drives divine activity. The Spirit is, as it was to Adam and Eve, the very breath of life. It is the very breath of **new** life. Central to the new life is new knowledge and new understanding, a renewed capacity to **respond** to God, to **know** God. “**And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves.**”

The Spirit's goal, the goal of ALL divine activity, is to make God known, so that, ultimately, God may be glorified. This act of God's compassion and triumph over death, in a word, resurrection, leads to a fresh knowledge of God's nature. A new revelation of God, that we might recognize when God speaks and acts, that we might have a clearer sense of God's presence. Our desire to exist, particularly as a church, are echoes of the hope projected by the resurrection stories. The ones we've read today and the one that we read Easter morning. The power of these stories of hope open our imagination. They help us fight the tendency to limit God by suppressing divine possibility, to resist the temptation to label the call to prophecy to dead bones as an impossible demand. But, in the end, isn't the gospel of Jesus Christ an impossible demand? **"Mortal, can these bones live?"** A surprising question. But Ezekiel's answer, **"O Lord, you know"**, speaks to two things. First, it speaks to the hopelessness (in terms of human understanding) of Israel's plight, and second to the limitless nature of divine power. Strangely, God calls upon Ezekiel to speak the prophetic word. Ezekiel's instructed to inform the people that their present situation and consequent despair will be transformed.

But these aren't necessarily words of comfort. Why? Because the **sole** basis for any hope in the face of desperation lies in God alone, not them as they're called into new fellowship and right relationship with God. God's Word spoken through the prophet offer the Israelites a powerful declaration of hope. It also offers that same hope to us who follow Jesus Christ. We are heirs of the glorious message of the prophets. God's people, then and now, will find in this passage, a dramatic affirmation. An affirmation that death can and will be overcome by God's Spirit. Thus, it also holds out hope for our churches, our communities, our very selves. At the same time, it tells us that revival cannot happen from within. It will occur only as God, by His grace, breathes on us again and brings us back to life. This shouldn't surprise us. We should know that the Lord is God. We should know that God keeps His promises. It occurs over and over in the Bible. It occurs in our gospel reading. Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will rise again. Not completely understanding, Martha replies that she knows that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. But Jesus says to her: **"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die, will live...and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die."** He then asks a question like the one put to Ezekiel: **"Do you believe this?"** Martha's response? **"Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."** Both Martha's response and the verse **"and you shall know that I am God"** points to something I said earlier regarding the greater purpose in divine activity, that it's to make God known and glorified. It's as Jesus said when He heard that Lazarus was ill: **"This illness does not lead to death...Rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."**

These stories challenge us to see things through God's eyes, to see things differently. "Mortal, can these bones live?" "No, Lord, of course not!!"

"If you'd have been here, no one would've died in the first place!

"Take away the stone." "But Lord, He's been dead four days..."

"Our hope is lost, we're cut off completely. Didn't I tell you that if you believed you'd see the glory of God?"

When we raise our sight to look beyond what our human eyes can see we watch the impossible become possible. Ezekiel urges God's people to see their situation through God's eyes, a God for whom all things are possible. Christ Himself does the same.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel observed that “all the events, all the prophetic visions in the Book [of Ezekiel], can be inserted in their proper calendar, with one notable exception: the vision of the dry bones. And we understand why: that vision, that hope, is not linked to either space or time. That vision, that consolation, is offered to every generation, for every generation needs it, and ours more than any before us.” Like the Israelites in exile we too can feel as good as dead. We may see our community, our church, as dead or dying. Such pessimism is understandable. It may be that certain aspects of our lives may indeed be dead. And, deep down, we know that death is inevitable! There’s a line in the Prayer of St Francis of Assisi, the last line. It says: “in dying we are born to eternal life.” Because only in death is resurrection possible. For that reason, we shouldn’t fear death in any sense because death doesn’t have the final word. Death isn’t the end. We know this. We know that Christ is Lord. We know that He is the resurrection and the life, that those who believe in Him, though they die, shall live, that everyone who lives and believes in Him shall never die. We **know** all this, but do we **believe** it? In the face of tragedy, illness, death, when the unthinkable happens, something terrible, life-shattering. What do we **do**? What do we **say**? How do we answer the question: “**Mortal can these bones live?**” Do we lament and curse our situation? Do we believe the lie that God isn’t listening? That God’s abandoned us? Or...Do we wait for and trust in God who alone can bring new life? The hard part is in some sense that we must be **willing** to die or to let certain parts of our lives die. Old habits, old understandings, old ways of thinking or seeing. But, isn’t it true that there can be no resurrection without death? Sometimes, death is an opportunity, sometimes the **only** opportunity for new life. Nowhere is this truer than in our church. Our Book of Order tells us that “the Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.” That’s a direct quote... So, is faith risky? Yes! But being in survival mode, clinging tightly to the past, what’s familiar and comfortable, what we know, is riskier still. WE! MUST! LET! GO! WE MUST!

Jesus Himself said that “**those who want to save their life will lose it...and those who lose their life for My sake will find it.**” How do you think the disciples reacted when they heard that? I imagine that Jesus’ words were about as welcome as Ezekiel’s prophetic word was to the exiles, as all my talk of change and transformation. Prophetic words like that are rarely greeted enthusiastically, they rarely contain a message we want to hear. They’re rarely words of comfort, and I think it’s because they often require difficult things of us and ask tough questions. They ask us to move out of our comfort zones where we **think** it’s safe. But the ancient Israelites failure to listen to the prophets, sixteen total (and those are just the one’s with books named after them), was what landed them in the valley of dry bones to begin with. So, I ask again, can these bones live again? Can we find new life? New ways of living? New ways of being the church? Nope. Absolutely not say disbelievers. But this really isn’t about faith. It’s about vision. A vision of what is possible, in our lives, in our homes, in our church. A new vision, not of dry bones and death but of new hope and new life.

Thanks be to God who makes all things new!

Amen and amen.