

“VISIONS: IV – EZEKIEL SAW DRY BONES”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

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Ezekiel 37:1-4

John 11:1-45

Most of you know from hearing me preach, that I am a Facebook user. I don't post a whole lot of stuff on there, but I like to see what's going on in everybody's life, and it's a really good way to find out what's going on in the lives of my nieces and nephews, in particular. At any rate, I heard the funniest thing about Facebook the other day. It seems that there was a grandmother who was on Facebook, and she heard from her daughter that their family's dog had died. Feeling bad for her grandson, granny decided to send him a "thinking of you" message on Facebook, only what she intended for good, turned out to be a disaster.

You see, this was her post. "Danny, your mom told me about Rusty dying." And then she added this: LOL.

Danny, her grandson sees the post, and is horrified. What? Granny? What in the world? You know why? Granny thought those three letters – LOL – meant "lots of love," but what they really mean are "laughing out loud!" So that's what Danny read, "Danny, your mom told me about Rusty dying. Laughing out loud!"

Did you ever find out that you misunderstood what you were doing?

Or how about this, did you ever find out that you totally misunderstood words to a song? I remember, years ago, hearing Carly Simon's song, "You're So Vain," and I could never understand the third line. The song went like this: You walked into a party, like you were walking onto a yacht, your hat strategically dipped below one eye, and then (I swear) it sounded like she was saying, "Your topic was Africa." I thought, what the heck does that mean? Your topic was Africa? Well, it doesn't mean anything because the line actually is "Your scarf it was apricot."

It's bad when you don't know the words, but maybe it's even worse when you know the words but really don't know what the song is about – which brings me actually to two songs I used to sing in choirs from high school onward – both which happen to be about the central character in this morning's lesson from the Hebrew scripture – Ezekiel. One song was "Ezekiel Saw De Wheel" and the other was "Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones." Sure, they were both catchy and fun to sing, but I daresay none of us ever really learned what they were about. It was just fun singing about all those old bones rising up and joining together – you know "the

knee bone connected to the thigh bone, and the thigh bone connected to the hip bone,” and so on, til all the bones were together. It’s a fun song, but what does it mean?

Well, today, we’re going to find out, by learning more about the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet from the seventh century BC, a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah. Much of his early prophecy was warning the people of God, the people of Israel, of impending doom – that if they were not careful and watchful, they would be swallowed up by enemies, and they would lose everything.

And sure enough, that came to pass. In 587 BC, the Babylonians swept over the Israelites, destroyed the temple, and sent them into exile. It was devastating, absolutely, positively devastating. They lost everything. They were strangers in a foreign land, and worse than that, they were utterly hopeless. Everything in which they put value, everyone in whom they trusted, everything was stripped away, and they were devastated. They were exiles in Babylon longing to be back home, in the land of their fathers.

There was no joy left in them, they could see no future, all they saw was sadness, desolation, despair. And then, Ezekiel saw something. He had a vision. You heard it read this morning. In the vision, God placed Ezekiel in the middle of a valley filled with dry, dusty, lifeless bones, and he told Ezekiel to speak to those bones, prophesy to them, tell them about God, and God’s power to bring them to life again.

Now, just think about that. Think about old Ezekiel standing there in the midst of dust and death. God’s telling him to speak a word of hope and promise in the face of dust and death. How easy it would have been to say, “God, are you kidding? These bodies are dead. Dead as a doornail. And you want me to talk to them? You want me to give them hope for a new future?”

But apparently Ezekiel didn’t do that; no, instead he did as God asked of him, and suddenly, astonishingly, he watches as those dry bones begin to rattle and move and merge together with other bones, and then sinew and flesh and skin covers them, and the breath of God blows over them, and they are living and breathing once again! What an incredible vision!

And then God says, tell them that I will take them home again.

Oh, how I wish I had known the story when I sang about “dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.” Because it wasn’t just “the knee bone connecting to the thigh bone,” it was the dead coming back to life! It was the despairing being filled with hope! It was the alien returning home! It is the story of our faith!

It’s a story that’s told in just as powerful a way in the Gospel lesson – a man dead in a tomb for days, Lazarus, being brought back to life.

It's the story of our faith! And it's a story, I am more convinced than ever, that we need to tell to a world that sometimes seems mired in death and despair, in hopelessness and helplessness.

I believe we are called to be Ezekiels – telling the world about a God in whom all things are possible. Ezekiels who look into the face of a drug addict and say it doesn't have to be that way – God can make you new. Ezekiels who listen to the news reports of horrific acts of violence by groups like ISIS who still say to the world, it doesn't have to be that way – God will lead us out of this. Ezekiels who look into the face of the hungry and homeless, and say it doesn't have to be this way – God will show us the way to help you get out of this. Ezekiels who look into the faces of those depressed and despairing and say it doesn't have to be this way – God can make all things new.

God did make all things new for the people of Israel – they were restored, they did return to the land of their fathers, they did find hope again. In the midst of death, destruction and despair, God made a way.

In the midst of death, destruction and despair, God can always make a way. I know many of you could testify to that – there were times in your life when you were hopeless or helpless, when life crashed all around you, or someone disappointed you, or someone you loved was taken away; when you were down to your last dollar, or had sunk to the bottom after that last drink – and God, somehow mysteriously, wondrously, picked you up and started you back on the path to new life, slowly, but surely. There were times you wondered if you would survive, but survive you did, because God's breath of life and hope blew into your life, and made a way.

As I was writing this sermon, so many stories of new life and new possibilities coming out of terrible situations came into my mind. I thought back to the early 1970's, and one night I was in Wilmington at what was then called the old Delaware Division where Susan was working while in training to be an X-ray technician. It was really late at night, and as we went into the hospital, a man was walking out – his name was Joe Biden. It was right after his wife and young daughter had been killed in a horrible traffic accident – which happened just after he was first elected to Congress – and his two young sons were critically injured. Life doesn't get much more despairing than that. None of us can imagine the pain he went through – and yet, over time, God made a way.

Over time, there was healing. His sons recovered, he eventually went on to fall in love and remarry, and have another child, another daughter. He continued to serve in Congress, and we know the rest of the story. But who knew, on that terrible day back in 1972, when all looked so bleak and hopeless, what was to come? God did, and it was God who made a way.

Or how about Michael Oher? You know his story from the movie "Blind Side" or from watching him when he played for the Baltimore Ravens. Michael was a

child from a horribly broken home, a home marked by drug abuse, violence and neglect. His father abandoned the family, his mother might as well have, for all the attention she failed to give him. He was basically on his own, with no hope for the future. People probably figured (and maybe he did as well) that he would end up just like the rest of them – poor, addicted, violent. It was a bleak prospect.

Until one day that the breath of God swept over Michael's life in the form of a loving family called the Tuohy's – whose hearts broke over this child and whose arms opened to welcome him into their family. And his life changed dramatically. Instead of descending into addiction and despair, he rose to be a gifted young man, whose talent on the football field eventually saw him go to college at Old Miss and play in the National Football League. Now, I know that he just got cut from the Tennessee Titans – so things aren't so great right now – but just because God brings new life doesn't mean there won't be bumps along the way again at some point. What it means is that God is still there, carrying us through that as well. With God on our side, nothing can ultimately defeat us – not despair, not loss, not trials, not even death. Nothing can ultimately defeat us – because our God is a God of new life and new possibilities.

The cross is our ever-present reminder of that. When life was at its worst, and evil seemed to have the final word, when the precious Son of God was falsely accused, arrested, tried, put to death on a cruel cross, and laid in a tomb – God's breath blew life into him and he burst victorious from that grave.

And because of that, new life is possible for all of us, no matter what graves (figuratively or literally) in which we find ourselves. One writer put it this way: "Today (in this lesson) we hear a promise only God can give. God's breath, the Holy Spirit, moves through the world, raising people into new life when all the odds are against it. We need to hear the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. It is a scene meant to live in the imagination and the heart, when we find ourselves gasping for breath, struggling to stay alive." (*Feasting on the Word*, Lent 5A, James Wallace, p. 125)

So, if that is you, if today, you are gasping for breath or struggling to stay alive, if today you feel the despair and know what those dry bones felt like, if today you are hopeless, let Ezekiel's vision touch your heart. Know that the God who brought those bones to life, who brought Lazarus out of the grave, and who made Jesus to rise victorious from death, is the very same God who is with you this very minute and will make a way for you as well. He is the God of life and new life – and promises to never leave you alone. So trust in that, and let Ezekiel's vision speak to you right now that you might have hope and a vision for a brighter and better day.

If you looked at your bulletin ahead of time, you might have thought I was confused on what time of year this is – because the last two hymns in this service are Easter hymns. But I'm not confused – I chose them deliberately – because they are both songs of victory – songs that remind us that we serve a risen Savior, who lives even today – and because he lives, no matter what life brings our way, we live

too! Out of death, into life, God makes a way – always – and that, my friends, is the Good News of the Gospel! Thanks be to God.

Amen.