

This message was prepared for the Tontogany Presbyterian Church by Pamela Short and delivered on Sunday the sixth day of April, in the year of our LORD two thousand and fourteen

Texts, presented here in New Revised Standard Version

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. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 I 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." 7 So 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. 8 I 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. 9 Then 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." 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11 Then 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.' 12 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, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I 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."

John 11

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it, he said, "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." 5 Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6 after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10 But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." 11 After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." 12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." 13 Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. 15 For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." 17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and

Mary to console them about their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. **21** Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22** But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." **23** Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." **24** Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." **25** Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, **26** and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" **27** She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." **28** When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." **29** And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. **30** Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. **31** The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. **32** When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." **33** When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. **34** He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." **35** Jesus began to weep. **36** So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" **37** But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" **38** Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. **39** Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." **40** Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" **41** So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." **43** When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" **44** The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." **45** Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. **46** But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. **47** So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. **48** If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." **49** But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! **50** You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." **51** He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, **52** and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. **53** So from that day on they planned to put him to death. **54** Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples. **55** Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. **56** They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?" **57** Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

Our Bible stories for today meet us in death and surprise us with life. One with fresh cuts of loss; an intimate, weeping story of sisters in sorrow for a single soul; the other a vast and horrible community defeat where courage has long since been scorched and hope is cut off.

By reading them together, the story of the little family carries a river of tears back to the story of the valley. It reminds us that even in war and massive destruction, each one who is fallen is still someone's brother or sister or father or friend. And the story of the valley blows into Bethany reminding us that Resurrection comes only the Word and the Breath of God.

The stories are separated by more than 550 years. Ezekiel lived at drastic time in human history. The space of grace that God had set up in the Promised Land was completely soiled with nauseating sin. People looked to their own interests. They went after false gods and they became false. The Potter had reshaped them many times, yet their hearts were hard, immoveable and beyond repair. God broke the nations of Israel and of Judah and said Enough.

I have had enough of your selfishness.

Enough of your false living.

Enough of your greed and abuse and arrogance and violence.

Enough of your neglect of widows;

Enough of you forgetting to take care of orphans.

I have had enough of you sacrificing your children and calling it worship.

And so Ezekiel records for us shocking, and devastating events of judgment. You see, God's discipline through the Exile is in full swing by this time. The Israelites of the Northern kingdom have long since been scattered by the Assyrians. The Southern kingdom lasted a little bit longer, but eventually could not overcome the relentless siege of Babylon on Judah's capital city, Jerusalem. With their temple laid flat and their battles lost, these children of Israel are carried off to Babylon in chains of defeat.

And right in the midst of the Exile, along comes Ezekiel. No, I should say along God comes.

The hand of God to be precise:

The hand of the LORD came upon me,

and God brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD

and set me down in the middle of a valley;

it was full of bones.

When we read the hand of the LORD came upon me" What do you picture in your mind? Do you see God scooping up Ezekiel in the palm of **the** hand? Do you see God lifting him by the scruff of the neck and plopping him down? Or maybe you see God taking him by the hand and journeying with him side by side until they reach the valley.

The hand of the LORD came upon me. As a pastor I sometimes pray that you will feel the touch of God. By this I am most often asking that God comfort you so that you have a sense of how deeply God loves you.

Here the hand of the LORD was not immediately comforting. The hand of the Lord comes upon Ezekiel. The Spirit of the Lord brings him out from who knows where and sets him down right in the middle of a grave yard. And this is not just any grave yard, but an entire valley full of bones.

Surely there was a day when the valley was filled with sprouts of grass and wild flowers after a good rain and mountain goats coming down for an evening meal. But then the soldiers gathered and the goat scattered and the wild flowers were trampled and the grass torn from its tender roots as the shouts of war and clashes of swords echoed off the sides of the cliffs. As the battle cries cease, the blood of the valiant soaks quietly into the earth. It is a silent place now. A place forsaken, even by the wind.

Contrast this with the sound of the mourners at Lazarus tomb. Their voices rise to express outrage that death should be so brazenly friendly; the sounds of chatter come from all corners:

“If you had been here my brother would not have died.”

"Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

And add to this Jesus' own distressing wails. Our bibles tell us "Jesus was greatly disturbed". In the original language the story teller chooses the greatest expression of anger found in the Greek New Testament. In fact, it is associated with the sound of a horse snorting in anger. Jesus not only feels anger in the face of death, he displays it with passionate sounds of grief from deep within his soul.

Christians tend to have a bad reputation when it comes to comforting the grieving. We want to deny anger and run away for the pain; we want to skip right to resurrection and forget the horror of death.

But Jesus, who knew resurrection, was so very close still howled in agony at the grave of his friend.

Back in the valley of the dry bones, Ezekiel cries out, "O dry bones! Hear the Word of the LORD!"

The stories come together as Jesus cries out "Lazarus! Come forth!"

"Behold!" For God to speak is for God to act.

To the confounded and grieving sisters Jesus speaks "I am the Resurrection the Life"

To the confounded and grieving house of Israel, God speaks, "I am going to open your graves;

I'm going to put my Spirit within;

I'm going to set you on your own soil."

Like Adam who was made from soil,

I am going to breathe life into you and "you will know that I am the LORD."

Edward Mark-Quart says, *“The very essence of God is to take that which is dead and make it alive again.”*

What would this town look like if the empty store fronts were rattled open by the Word of the LORD?
 What if the winds of the Spirit of God blew through the streets and into the homes, across the park and down the hallways of the schools?

What would your own family look like if Jesus called out, “Friend, come forth!”

What would your soul feel like if Jesus instructed those who grieve for you to unbind you and to let you go?

Is your relationship with your brother dead? Is your marriage dried up?

Is there utter silence between you and your child?

Does your work place feel like a tomb?

Are you convinced that there is absolutely nothing you can do about it?

Then you are at the beginning of hope; for you stand in the face of what only God can do;

God’s work of resurrection;

For you see, *“The very essence of God is to take that which is dead and make it alive again.”*

Now People of God

May our God who strengthens

Call to the four Winds on your behalf

May what is dead in you be rattled to life and

what has perished in you be made whole.

May the deep love of the Holy Spirit breathe

into your inner most substance and bring you life.

For indeed,

The LORD has spoken and will act.

I am grateful to the following resources who informed this message:

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