

“Can these bones live?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:17-45

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Imagine with me. A valley of sand, full of bones bleached by the sun. You might wonder what you’re doing here. Why are there so many bones? This is kind of creepy. Well, they may be the bones of the people who were killed when the Babylonian army rolled into Israel in the 6th century BCE, brandishing sword and fire. Or, they may be the ones who survived—a poetic representation of living people who have lost hope, whose spirits rattle inside them like dry bones.

We’ve stood in these deserts—just as we have stood outside, or inside, our own versions of the cave where they entombed Lazarus, some six hundred years later. A heavy stone rests against the entrance. Both sisters, Mary and Martha, say to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” It is both a statement of faith and an accusation of grief and anger.

“Can these bones live?” God asks Ezekiel. The prophet answers, “O Lord God, only you know.”

Today, we continue our reflection on devotion to the church’s teaching. Last week, we affirmed that you totally have the right to think for yourself, to question and challenge, and to honor Christ’s sole lordship over your conscience, even as you also have a responsibility to study and learn from the teachings of your ancestors. Today, we focus on one of those teachings; it’s both one of the most important and one of the most difficult: resurrection.

This isn’t just the belief that we go to heaven. This is the belief that, after Jesus died, he was resurrected—brought back in body and spirit, fully himself, with even the scars to prove it. Now, death no longer holds dominion over him. He is free. He is eternal. In turn, the church believes that we also will be resurrected. After we die, our bodies will return to the earth, while our souls return to God, but some day, God will reunite our souls with our bodies.

We of course confess that this is a mystery that we can hardly understand. Not all Christians believe in the bodily resurrection. *You* may or may not believe. Oh we can get behind the teachings about love, justice, a Creator and Spirit, maybe even a heaven full of souls. But resurrection is harder. It defies our scientific and modern sensibilities.

What I love about these two stories from the Bible is that both say that’s OK. Got doubts? Not sure about all this? That’s OK. God accepts Ezekiel’s equivocation when he says, “God, only you know.” It’s an honest facing of the mystery and reality of death. In turn, despite everything Jesus says about how important it is to believe, Jesus accepts Mary’s questioning and doubt. He doesn’t judge her. He weeps with her.

And then because he loves her, because he is “deeply moved” in his spirit, Jesus resurrects anyway. God breathes and makes those bones live anyway.

Both stories ask for faith. But neither wait for us to understand and believe. God just gives life. Freely and abundantly. Out of love. Hoping that, in witnessing such life, we will believe.

Jesus cries with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” God says to the bones, “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.”

What makes us Christian is that we believe, standing in the valley, that these bones can live. We believe it even when we don’t understand it. We hope it even when we don’t believe it. We are promised it even when we can’t hope it.

You may be lying in that valley, or locked in that cave, and you may not have any strength left to believe or hope, but God’s gonna find you. God’s gonna cry out your name. God’s gonna kneel over you, press God’s lips to you, and breathe into you.

We believe with the Apostle Paul that nothing, not even death itself, will separate us from the love of God or each other. We believe that Christ has defeated death, overcoming the last barrier between God and humanity. We believe that every tomb shall have its stone rolled away, and every grave be made empty, and every hurting heart mended, and every joyful laugh released. We believe that life—because of some inexhaustible power—rises... rises.... rises.

We believe that there *is* hope. And we believe that that hope is total. This is what makes me believe that resurrection is a more compelling idea than the belief that we simply become disembodied spirits.

When someone dies, we want more than a spirit. We want *them*. We want the way they laughed, or wrinkled their nose when they got angry. We want the smell of cookies baking in the kitchen, and the things they loved like buttons or old books. We want checkers out on the front lawn, and the way their hair shined in the sunlight. We want freckles, and fresh cut grass, and ice-cold lemonade. We want it all—their thoughts, their memories, their bodies.

We want to know that they—and we—persist in the essentialness of who we are, of whom God made us to be.

When Christ resurrects Lazarus, he resurrects all of him. When God gives life to those bones, Ezekiel sees the bones take on flesh; they grow sinews and skin; they breathe; they walk.

We are souls, yes, but we are embodied souls, and we delight in these bodies, formed from the dust of the earth, mixed with the breath of God, and pronounced good.

Moreover, not only do we believe that there is hope, and that that hope is total and embodied, but we also believe that we are resurrected not just some time, not later, not just after we die, but now, today.

We live a resurrected life now. We are freed to live a new life of purpose, joy, and love, today. We are freed to live with God, today. We are freed to be our full and entire self, sacred and beloved, today.

God explains to Ezekiel that these bones represent “the whole house of Israel,” the living people who think they are dead, who think there is no hope. God’s talking about the people in exile. God tells them that God’s gonna open up those graves, those places of despair, and bring them up. “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live,” says the Lord God.

Similarly, when Jesus says to Martha, “Your brother will rise again,” Martha hears a platitude, the kind of empty thing people say to comfort the grieving. She believes he’s talking about something in the future. Jesus says, “*I* am the resurrection and the life. I’m talking about right now. Your brother will rise today.”

So, yes, we have hope, and that hope is entire, and that hope isn’t just someday, but today. We believe that these bones *can* live. These bones buried in death, they can live. These bones weary, aging, and aching, they can live. These bones stripped by poverty, injustice, and violence, they can live. These bones ravaged by grief and heartbreak, they can live.

They’re going to live because God is going to find you in that valley and breathe life into you—even when you can’t believe it. **Amen.**