

May 18 & 19, 2024 – Pentecost

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Dear friends in Christ Jesus:

Jesus was deeply moved again as he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. “Take away the stone,” he said. Martha, the dead man’s sister, told him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, because it has been four days.” (John 11:38-39) Or, as the King James Version beautifully renders it, **“Lord, by this time, he stinketh.”** Death and decay confronted the Resurrection and the Life. Still, the Author of Life calls to the dead man, **“Lazarus, come out!”** And the impossible happens. The dead man walks out of his tomb alive.

This wasn’t the only time in Jesus’ ministry when he had something to say in the face of death. Who can forget the scene of the two parades silently slipping past each other, the one coming down the hill from that town of Nain, led by a widow who was about to bury her son, the other headed up by Jesus himself. He stops. He puts his hand on the casket, and with one sentence changes everything. **“Young man, I say to you, get up!”** (Luke 7:14) And the impossible happens. The dead man comes back to life.

Every experience we’ve ever had would lead us to a pretty rock-solid conclusion: death is a one way street from which nobody comes back. From the first shovel full of fresh graveyard dirt to the one-sided conversations with a tombstone for years to come, it’s a fool’s errand to try to talk down death. It just doesn’t work.

So how do you think the prophet Ezekiel felt? Standing ankle deep in a valley of bones with a call to preach? The Lord had called this prophet to do some strange sounding things in the past, too. God once told Ezekiel to draw the city of Jerusalem on a clay tablet, and then build little camps and battering rams around it, all to show that Jerusalem would be overtaken and overrun. Next, the Lord commanded Ezekiel to lie on his left side for 390 days and then lie on his right side for 40 days to show that Israel’s sin had not gone unnoticed by a holy God. Then, God had Ezekiel shave his entire head and beard, and throw one third of his hair into the fire, take one third of his hair and strike it with a sword, and cast the final third to the wind, all to teach that these rebellious people would be destroyed, pursued with the sword, and scattered to the winds.

All those vivid lessons about what damage their sin would do, the people ignored. They were taken into the Babylonian Captivity. Jerusalem was overtaken and overrun. And now, sitting in exile in Babylon, they hear the worst news of all: the temple had been destroyed. So, there they sat, abandoned and alone. In other words, to borrow a phrase, Israel stinketh. What could they say? **Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off.** What hope could there possibly be for them?

This is where we meet the prophet Ezekiel in our sermon text. God had called his prophet to do some strange things in the past, but this one took the cake. **The hand of the LORD was upon me. He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley, which was full of bones...and they were very dry.** How strange! The Lord brings his prophet to a valley; not a valley with amber waves of grain, but a valley strewn with bones. What Ezekiel saw before him was death, unvarnished, unmistakable, irreversible death. These weren’t fresh corpses recently fallen in battle. No, these were sun bleached brittle old bones. As the Lord took his prophet on this tour of ‘death valley,’ the point became clear. These very dead, very dry bones had something in common with Israel. They were cut off from their life source. They had forsaken their Lord, ignored his word, and now they were feeling his discipline. The whole promised people appeared as helpless as a valley full of dead, dry bones. But the Lord had other plans. **He said to me, “Son of man, can these dry bones live?” I answered, “LORD God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD...I will attach tendons to you. I will put flesh back on you. I will cover you with skin.’”** Even stranger, right? The Lord calls on his prophet to preach, **“Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD,”** but there wasn’t an ear among them! What’s the use?

Have you ever felt that way? *What’s the use?!* Have you ever felt like captive Israel crying out, **“Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off?”** When you look at your life and you come to the conclusion that nothing is as it should be: when it’s your health that’s changed from prime to problem; when it’s your chosen career that you thought would be more of a path to success and less of a brick wall. **Our bones are dried up,** when it’s my family that’s so messed up, I’m ashamed even to talk about it. **Our hope is lost,** when the only happiness that remains in my marriage is what’s captured in those pictures on the wall. **We have been**

completely cut off, when my loneliness is crippling, and I don't feel like I've got a friend in the world. Have you ever felt like that? When you look at your life and conclude that nothing is as it should be? Have you ever felt that way when you look at your relationship with God? **My bones are dried up**, when I look in the mirror and I find myself wishing that last night was just a bad dream. **My hope is gone**, because I did it again, you know, the sin I promised I'd never come close to. **I'm completely cut off**, because maybe this time I've out-sinned God's grace. After all, what would he ever want with me, this dead, dry bag of bones? *What's the use?* To borrow a phrase, because of sin I stinketh, and so do you. Have you ever felt like your life and your faith are about as useless as preaching to a valley full of dead bones? Well, good thing you've got a God who only creates from nothing!

Ezekiel said, **“So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I was prophesying there was a noise, a rattling, as the bones came together, one bone connecting to another. As I watched, tendons were attached to them, then flesh grew over them, and skin covered them. But there was no breath in them.”** You can hear the song, can't you? Foot bone to ankle bone, ankle bone to shin bone, shin bone to knee bone, etc. What a miracle, from bones to bodies, beautiful and fully formed. But **there was no breath in them**. They were lifeless. They looked the part, but apart from God and the gift of his Holy Spirit working through his Word, they would remain lifeless. That's what happens when we search for solutions in ourselves instead of Scripture. Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, we're cut off. We think, “But if I just apply the right principles, if I just take the right steps, if I only commit harder than I've ever committed before, then things will start looking up.” But those self-made solutions stinketh! They'll only leave us looking polished and put together on the outside, but dead on the inside. Only One can bring life from death: **This is what the LORD God says. From the four winds, come, O wind, and breathe into these slain so that they may live.**

And what happened? **Breath entered them, and they came back to life. They stood on their feet.** After sending his prophet Ezekiel to warn of doom, gloom, and destruction, the Lord proclaims a new message, a message of life. He would restore his people and bring them back to their homeland. The life-giving Spirit of God accompanied the preaching of his Word, calling out into a void incapable of responding, and created life where there was only death.

This is the message of Pentecost. Into a world enslaved to sin and death, the Lord Jesus sent his apostles with a message that brings life from death. Into a planet-earth-sized valley of dry bones, the Lord of the Church speaks his gospel promise through his messengers. This Jesus, whom you crucified, God has raised to life. This Jesus has paid for your sin and defeated your death, giving you the sure hope of life forever in heaven and a reason to exist right now. Talk about a life-giving message!

The work of the Holy Spirit didn't end in Ezekiel's valley of dry bones and it didn't stop with Peter's powerful Pentecost preaching. The same live-giving Holy Spirit of God that accompanied Ezekiel's and Peter's preaching is living and active today. Through the preaching of his Word, calling out into a void incapable of responding, **The Holy Spirit Creates Life** where there was only death. It happens at an unimpressive font with eighteen words and three splashes of water. And what happens? The Holy Spirit works, connecting us to Christ's death and resurrection. Because he lives, we live. The Holy Spirit still creates life where there was only death. It happens in a wafer of bread and a sip of wine, as Jesus gives you his body and blood given and shed for you. The Holy Spirit still creates life where there was only death. It happens through this cracked clay standing before you. *“As a called servant of Christ, and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins.”*

The Spirit gives life. What a powerful Pentecost promise to cherish. The Holy Spirit gives life, and he does it through his Word and Sacraments. Every time you hear your Savior's voice in the good news of the gospel; every time you pass by the font and remember what happened there and you proclaim, “I am baptized into Christ;” every time you stand shoulder to shoulder with these fellow sinner/saints and taste and see your forgiveness, the Holy Spirit is giving life. So don't sever that lifeline. Rejoice in every opportunity to hear and receive all the good things God has done for you in Christ.

If you haven't yet, someday you may be tempted to think like the Israelites of Ezekiel's day. **Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off.** When that day comes, remember the power and promise of the Holy Spirit working through the Word and Sacraments. We're not dried up. We've been washed in the Spirit's saving flood. Our hope isn't gone. Instead our hope is a person, once dead and alive again, for you.

Cut off? Hardly! Listen to your Savior's promise that nothing can snatch you from his loving embrace. This Pentecost day, and every day until Jesus returns, rejoice that the Holy Spirit gives life, and that he's given it even to you! Amen.