

Ezekiel 37 The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."
⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!' ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD."
⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.
⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.
¹¹ Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'"

The readings this morning deal with resurrection in surprising ways! They also deal in doubt. Let's begin by looking at Ezekiel's story.

Ezekiel was a priest in Judah, living at an unfortunate time. Under David's rule Israel and Judah split and became slowly weaker, under a succession of kings whose faith in the Lord was weak. God sent prophets to warn the kings and the people that they were breaking their covenant promises to God, and that God would be obliged to withdraw his protection from them to remind them of their broken faith. There were a few bright points in which good kings remembered God, but these were interspersed with many more kings who permitted foreign gods to be worshipped — and all the truly terrible practices that went hand in hand with this, such as human sacrifice.

These nations continuing to be unrepentant, God allowed them to be conquered — the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel first. A few years later, Judah succumbed to Babylon. But even before Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed, Babylon had great control of Judah, and took a first tranche of priests and leaders into exile. Ezekiel was one of these.

The first *surprise* is that in exile *they were not cut off forever from God* — you see, Judean worship, poor as it may have been, was centred around Jerusalem and its temple — take the people from the temple, and how can they be reconciled to God? Their situation seemed utterly hopeless! And so God comes to Ezekiel in the midst of his desperation, with an awesome vision of glory and power. He comes with strange creatures and the creatures have wheels that roll with them and they are sparkly like topaz — and the message is simply this — God is with you! God can move! There is no *place* that is beyond the Lord's power — not even Babylon! There is no *one* beyond his salvation.

God gives Ezekiel many 'oracles' or prophecies for his people — a large portion of which are about making them see that they are at fault, they strayed from God, they were unfaithful, they landed themselves in it. But the mood turns to hope. And the most famous of Ezekiel's messages of hope is the valley of dry bones.

Imagine it now. God shows him a valley of dry bones. Ezekiel walks up and down the valley. Perhaps you can picture the sun beating down and feel the heat. What does it mean? Surely this is a cursed place — a battle must have taken place here and the bodies left as carrion — a cruel practice of neighbour nations at the time, as a way of cursing their enemies. But this is not another prophesy of woe against the exiles, because God has something much better in mind.

You need to know that at this time the people did not believe in resurrection in any form. Elisha had raised a recently dead person back to life, but there was no expectation of life after death, or indeed of any form of general resurrection. Now God tests Ezekiel on this — 'can these dry bones come back to life?' Ezekiel is hesitant, what should he say? — 'you know Lord!' a respectful answer, but a cop-out!

But the answer is yes! Yes they can! And so God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones. And he does. Ezekiel is not speaking to the living, nor to dead bodies, but to dry bones! What happens next is not Ezekiel's doing, but the Lord invites him and involves him in the good bit. And, in this vision, the bones rise up, and are re-clothed in flesh and sinew and skin, and the breath of life restored to them.

God brings life out of death and hope out of darkness.

There's a cool detail in this passage, and it is about the word for Spirit, *ruach*. But this is also the same word for wind and for breath. One word has the same meaning. In fact, the same is true in the Greek when Jesus talks to Nicodemus — Jesus puns on the wind going where it pleases and on the Spirit doing what it chooses. So now, Ezekiel is brought out to the valley by the *ruach* of the Lord.

Then Ezekiel prophesies: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make *ruach* enter you, and you will come to life.'

And then: 'come *ruach* (breath) from the four *ruchot* (the four winds) and breathe into these slain, that they may live.' And it happens, and they stand up, a vast army.

And then God tells Ezekiel what it all means — the bones are the people of Israel. They say: 'our bones are dried up, our hope gone, we are cut off.'

The vision is picture, not of those already dead, but of the living: the people of Israel in their exile feel good as dead, without a shred of hope, and bereft of God in every way. Into their despair, God was promising that they would live, that they would return home, that God was *with* them, and had not forgotten them.

Now, that was then. That was that story. What is this story to our story, and to your story?

The time is different, the place is different and our circumstances are different... But our God is the same God, and his nature does not change. Indeed, God has echoed this picture down through the ages. The exiles returned home. Lazarus was raised. Jesus rose. And 11 dispirited disciples of Good Friday became like a force of nature when the Spirit, the *ruach* was breathed into them on Pentecost.

For the church in this country it is easy to picture the cultural tides of postmodern skepticism and materialism as our Babylon — the church has dwindled in numbers and influence. It is easy to see this as an inevitable trajectory — ‘10 more years and they’ll close the doors!’ — that sort of thing. Maybe the church will dwindle still further in number... but it is God’s nature to revive, to restore, to breathe life and the Spirit into his people. We are people of the resurrection. We are people of hope and faith. This is important. We can trust in God to breathe life into his people, the church again. Because that is his nature. Do not fear for the future of the church, or of this church. It is God’s.

Now, I invite you to take a moment to think of something in your life that seems hopeless. Perhaps someone’s health. Perhaps a relationship, perhaps a project. Don’t feel you have to tell me! And now, I invite you to say a little prayer of faith, that the God of Ezekiel, who breathes life into dry bones, might breathe hope into your problem, and into each others’ problems. And trust that God will answer....

Amen.