

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“God Gives Life to the Dead” (Ezekiel 37:1-14)
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Last summer I had the privilege of visiting Paris with my daughter Becky—without question one of the best trips of my life. We were awestruck by Paris’ ubiquitous gorgeous architecture, and paintings by Monet, Picasso, and Van Gogh. We saw a spectacular light show on the Eiffel Tower, walked along the Seine, visited Victor Hugo’s crypt at the Pantheon (yes, I had a moment because *Les Miserables* is my favorite novel ever) and of course browsed in one of the most famous bookstores in the world, Shakespeare and Company, where back in the day Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce, gathered.

But one of the highlights of this trip actually occurred down low, literally underground in the darkness beneath the City of Light, as we toured the famous catacombs. Originally a large network of tunnels beneath Paris was used in connection with their vast stone quarries, but in the late eighteenth century, due to a combination of overflowing cemeteries and the collapse of the Saint Innocents cemetery, it was decided to transform part of these tunnels into an ossuary. Countless corpses were carried in wagons to a mine shaft and dropped down into the tunnels and over several years the bones of these corpses, over six million corpses (yes, six million) were organized and arranged—an unimaginable job.

Today when you walk the two kilometers of the catacombs tour it is absolutely overwhelming to see millions of femurs and skulls and other bones all neatly stacked. On and on it goes, walls of bones on both sides—and after every turn as far as you can see, still more bones. It is so vast and gruesome it seems fake—like you are touring a movie set for some twisted horror film. But it is all very real—the real bones of real people like you and me—large adult skulls, tiny infant skulls—sometimes skulls arranged in the shape of a cross in the midst of countless other bones. Here and there in Latin and French scripture passages are carved—including these words from the Magnificat, “(God) has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52).

Today's Old Testament passage from Ezekiel is a very famous one, a passage about God giving life to the dead. Ezekiel served as a prophet in Israel during their captivity, about six centuries before Christ, and the book that bears his name is replete with hope, especially hope in the midst of death. Ezekiel writes:

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. He led me all around them; there were many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 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." (Ezekiel 37:1-6)

It was not Ezekiel's idea to visit this valley of dry bones; he was brought there by the hand of the Lord. And Ezekiel described this myriad of bones as "very dry." When God asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" even though on the surface it seemed like an absurd question, a ridiculous question, Ezekiel wisely answered, "O Lord God, you know" (a wise answer in any circumstance). Then God commanded Ezekiel to do something that also seemed absurd and ridiculous, "Prophesy to these bones." Tell them God will cover them with flesh and breathe life into them. How did Ezekiel respond?

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. 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. Then he said to me, "Prophesy 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." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude (Ezekiel 37:7-10).

God brought a valley full of the dead, a vast multitude of the dead, back to life.

God gives life to the dead. This is what the gospel is all about.

After Ezekiel witnessed this valley of “very dry” dead bones be given new life, God further assured him that this would happen for all Israel:

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.’ 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. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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 (Ezekiel 37:11-14).

God gives life to the dead whose “bones are dried up”, to the dead whose “hope is lost.” This is something only God can do. And God does not delegate this, but does this personally—“I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves...I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.” God promised this not just for some of the Israelites but for “the whole house of Israel.”

On his 2002 album *The Rising* Bruce Springsteen has a gospel song called “My City of Ruins,” originally written about the decline and decay of Asbury Park, the New Jersey beachfront town where he got his musical start. He later sang it after 9/11, and given the current challenges we face, it certainly resonates for us today:

There’s a blood red circle on the cold dark ground
And the rain is falling down
The church door’s thrown open, I can hear the organ song
But the congregation’s gone
My city of ruins, my city of ruins...
We pray for the faith, Lord
We pray for your love, Lord
We pray for the lost, Lord
We pray for this world, Lord
We pray for the strength, Lord
Come on, rise up! Come on, rise up!

God gives life to the dead—that is the heart of the gospel, especially in the Gospel According to John. In the prologue we read, “What has come into being in (Jesus Christ) was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:4). Jesus assured Nicodemus, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus comforted the woman at the well, “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). After his miracle of the feeding of the five thousand Jesus told the crowds, “I am the bread of life...and I will raise (you) up on the last day” (John 6:48, 54). Jesus summed it up this way, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that (you) may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). This abundant life from God is especially for the dead whose bones are dried up and whose hope is lost.

The Gospel According to John is structured around seven of Jesus’ miracles or “signs”, each of which reveal in a different way God giving life to the dead. The seventh and final and climactic of these signs is found in today’s gospel passage when Jesus demonstrates definitively that indeed God gives life to the dead. Three of Jesus’ close friends—the siblings Mary, and Martha and Lazarus—lived just a couple miles outside of Jerusalem in the small village of Bethany. Lazarus had died. Four days later, as Jesus approached Bethany Martha, still drowning in grief, told him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” to which Jesus replied, your brother will rise again.” Martha was a bit confused and Jesus continued with one of the most important statements he ever made, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (John 11:21, 23, 25).

Then Martha rushed home and told her sister Mary that Jesus was drawing near to Bethany and wanted to see her. Mary hurried down the road and when she got to Jesus, knelt down, and told him the exact same thing Martha had, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:28-29, 32). Jesus finally arrived at Lazarus’ grave and wept and then commanded the stone to be rolled away and cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And in the same way the bones in the valley were filled with the breath of the spirit and rose from the ground, Lazarus was again filled with the breath of the spirit and rose from the tomb—and as John put it, “The dead man came out” (John 11:39; 43-44).

Once again, God had given life to the dead.

Soon afterwards Jesus was gathered with his disciples at the Last Supper, and once again he spoke to them about life, “I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)...No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). The next day Jesus demonstrated that no one loves you more than God as he gave his life on the cross in order to give life to a dead world, to give life to those whose bones are very dry, to give life to those whose hope is lost, to give life to those who feel cut off completely, to give life to you. Indeed God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly—but in a way completely unexpected—for Jesus Christ the Son of God himself came down from his heavenly throne and became a lowly servant and died on a cross in order to lift up the lowly in the world. As Jesus suffered, beneath the cross was “a blood red circle on the cold dark ground.”

But on Easter morning something happened even more amazing than what Ezekiel witnessed in the valley of dry bones—Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as the stone had been rolled away from Lazarus’ grave, the stone was rolled away from Jesus’ grave. And just as Jesus had called Lazarus from the tomb, God the Father called his beloved Son from the tomb, “Jesus, come out! Come on, rise up! Come on, rise up!” And Jesus did.

And as we read in today’s epistle passage, scripture assures us that this will also happen with you—“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Romans 8:11). What happened with the valley of dry bones, what happened with Lazarus, what happened with Jesus, will happen with you. God’s words to Israel are God’s words to you, “I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves...I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live...then you shall know that I am the Lord.”

God gives life to the dead. One day the catacombs beneath Paris will be empty, one day there will be no more dry bones in the valley or anywhere else, one day we will all dwell together in the eternal City of Light—because the answer to the question, “Can these bones live?” is a resounding, unequivocal, and eternal “Yes!”

Amen.