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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Pentecost, Series B
Saturday, May 22nd, 2021 (Pentecost Eve)¹

Sermon: Dem Bones

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Focus: The Holy Spirit gives our bodies life and our souls eternal life.

Function: That they would rejoice in the Holy Spirit's gift of new life in Christ.

Structure: Story-Interrupted

Locus: "On the Last Day He [the Holy Spirit] will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true" (SC, 3rd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

♪ *Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones,
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

*Toe bone connected to the foot bone
Foot bone connected to the heel bone
Heel bone connected to the ankle bone
Ankle bone connected to the shin bone
Shin bone connected to the knee bone
Knee bone connected to the thigh bone
Thigh bone connected to the hip bone
Hip bone connected to the back bone
Back bone connected to the shoulder bone
Shoulder bone connected to the neck bone
Neck bone connected to the head bone
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

*Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around (rise again).
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around (rise again).
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around (rise again).
Now hear the word of the Lord. ♪*

¹ I only preached this at Saturday night worship. I preached a shorter, "file sermon" for Sunday morning.

Well, by now you probably figured out that the old spiritual, “Dem Bones,” was inspired by today’s Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel 37.

In our reading, the prophet relates how the hand of Yahweh came upon Ezekiel and transported him to a valley “full of bones” (Ezek. 37:1, ESV).² Whether Ezekiel was in the flesh or in the spirit, we do not know. Was it a vision or a real place? Again, we don’t know. But that is unnecessary to grasp the scene before him. “Behold, there were very many [bones] on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry” (v. 2). What lay before him was a mass grave of unburied bones—the human remains of a “great army” “slain” in battle (cf. vv. 9-10). It was a devastating sight. Where did they come from?

While mass graves have existed for thousands of years, the traumas of the twentieth century made us all too familiar with the evils of mass genocides, war crimes, and overwhelming disasters: the Jewish holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and the Serbian campaign of “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia, when bulldozers simply shoveled unidentified dead bodies by the hundreds or thousands into deep pits and covered them over again. The 1918 Spanish flu pandemic and the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami in Indonesia also overwhelmed the funeral industry with so many bodies that they simply had to consign them to mass graves in order to forestall a public health crisis from thousands of festering, contaminated corpses.

The Lord led Ezekiel around the unnamed valley to take in the sheer enormity of the scattered bones bleached by sun and wind. While the precise locale is not mentioned, I cannot help but wonder if Ezekiel was in the Valley of Bin Hinnom to the south of Jerusalem,³ which became a mass grave after the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. When the Babylonians finally breached the city, they killed so many people that the streets ran with blood—literally!

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, is from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

³ Also known as the Valley of Tophet(h).

The Babylonians carted off the best and the brightest of the traumatized survivors, including the royals, nobles, and priestly castes, leaving only the poorest of the poor to scratch out a living from the scorched earth.

There were more slain than living. With too many corpses to bury—and no priests to provide funeral rites—the people of Jerusalem simply threw the bodies into the Valley of Ben Hinnom and burned them. Eventually, only the bones were left. ♪ “*Dem bones, dem bones...*” ♪

Yahweh interrupted Ezekiel’s trance of horror with a question: “Son of man, can these bones live?” (v. 3), and with appropriate humility, Ezekiel demurred. “O Lord GOD, you know.” Ezekiel could not imagine a valley of dry bones coming back to life, but he also knew that the Creator of the universe could accomplish anything he set out to do. Who was Ezekiel to deny the possibility of divine intervention?

Then Yahweh commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones:

“Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon 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” (Ezek. 37:4-6).

So Ezekiel prophesied to the bones as Yahweh commanded. He preached the Word of God to a valley of dry bones—the deafest audience a preacher ever had. And lo, miracle of miracles! “The bones came together, bone to its bone” (v. 7). Sinews, tendons, muscles, and skin appeared! Dry bones no more, there was flesh! But they were still corpses. “There was no breath in them” (v. 8).

Yahweh told Ezekiel to “prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four window, O breath, and breathe on these

slain, that they may live” (v. 9). What happened next calls to mind the creation of Adam in Genesis 2, when Yahweh took a lump of clay and breathed his Spirit into it so that Adam came to life. The Old Testament uses the same Hebrew word (*ruah*) for “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit.” They’re all related ideas, yet have nuanced differences.

So Ezekiel did as God commanded: “I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath [Spirit] came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, and exceedingly great army” (v. 10).

I wish that I could’ve seen the look on Ezekiel’s face when that mighty army of God stood on its feet, living and breathing again after years of being nothing more than a pile of dry, dusty bones. “Son of man, can these bones live again?” (v. 3). Yes, they can—if God wills it!

Prophetic visions in the Old Testament rarely go unexplained. The Lord interpreted the vision in this way. “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off’” (v. 11). The Jewish exiles in Babylonian captivity were oppressed by their exile and terrorized by PTSD. Even though they weren’t six feet under, they didn’t feel much alive. They were more like the walking dead, you might say. Like the valley of dry bones, they felt spiritually and emotionally dead to the world around them. Their hope was dried up, and they felt abandoned by God.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever been so lonely, tired, or sick, that you cried out, “My bones are dried up, my hope is lost, and I’ve lost my connection to God”? You may not be a prisoner of war in a foreign land, but we are all exiles from Eden, Paradise lost by sin and the fall. And as you look around you, it’s nearly impossible to recognize the country that you grew up in, as our fellow citizens are taken hold by lies and strange ideas that don’t make any logical sense, let alone square up with Scripture. At other times, we despair that love has left

us with only the rubble of ruined relationships and broken hearts. Our parents are dead. Our kids don't respect us. We can't carry on a meaningful conversation with our spouse. Maybe your marriage or job feels like a prison. Maybe you are trapped by your many sins that entangle you. Perhaps, when you read our Bible, you feel like you're just staring at marks on a page, and God is most noticeable by his silence or apparent absence. Or you look around the church and see more blue hair and gray beards than young people. How is the Church to survive if the next generation doesn't carry the torch of the faith? Do you ever look around you and wonder, "Can these bones live again?"

If you have ever felt that way, then you can begin to relate to what the Jews meant by their complaint, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off" (Ezek. 37:11). But the Jewish exiles were *not* abandoned by God. Yahweh had not forgotten them, and hope was not lost. The Lord was still their God, and they were still his people. And he was going to raise them up out of their living hell and bring them back to the Promised Land of Israel, where they would live once again in their own land. "I will put my Spirit in you," Yahweh promised, "and you shall *live*, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD" (v. 14). And if Yahweh said it, he would do it; for God *never* breaks his Word or backs down from a promise. His Word is reliable and true. If he promises that you will live again, then you shall live. If he declares that your sins are forgiven, then you are forgiven. You can't argue with God's Word.

The scene in Ezekiel 37 is only a vision—"only" we say. It does not appear to be a historical event of an actual resurrection. No, that will not happen until the Last Day. And until then, we live in a culture of death.

In one sense, we might say that the entire world is a mass grave. I have read various estimates that over 100 *billion* people lay buried beneath our feet (and underwater). The dead outnumber the living by at least 14 to 1. Remember that in the days of Noah, God destroyed the whole earth's population, sparing only Noah and his family—eight souls in all. And even with more than 7 billion people alive on the planet today, each one of us is going to die someday—unless Christ comes back first.

Yet the Day is coming when death will come undone once and forever. For when Christ returns on the Last Day, he will summon us to step forth from our graves. He will breathe his Holy Spirit back into our bodies, and we shall stand on our feet again with flesh and blood, breath and bone—just like Jesus' glorified body on that first Easter. In John's vision of Judgment Day, he beholds an extraordinary sight: "And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done" (Rev. 20:13). The righteous will be raised to everlasting life and bliss with God in the new heaven and new earth. The unrighteous will be thrown into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels—a second death worse than the first.

But you don't have to wait until the Last Day for new life to come. Even now, Jesus says, those who hear and believe his Word have passed from death into life (John 5:24). The same Spirit that reanimated the corpses in Ezekiel's vision is the same Spirit poured out upon the Church on Pentecost, empowering the disciples to proclaim the Gospel in languages they never learned in high school. The same Spirit came to you in the waters of Baptism to wash away your sins and give you faith in Jesus. The same Spirit whispers to you through the words of Scripture. And the same Spirit now lives in you, because your body is now the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). No matter how down and out you might feel, you are not dead inside. Your bones

are not dried up, and your hope is not cut off, because nobody can quench the Spirit who burns within your heart. God loves you with an unending love, and your life is hidden in Christ.

The word Yahweh spoke by Ezekiel the prophet is the Word of God for you today: “And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live...” (Ezek. 37:13-14). “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants... I will pour out my spirit, and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18). “Prophecy to the bones, son of man. Prophecy!” And they shall be made alive.

*♪ Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around (rise again).
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around (rise again).
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around (rise again).
Now hear the word of the Lord. ♪*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ Holy Spirit. Amen.