



Date: June 12, 2016

Title: "Zeke's Dancing Bones"

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Description: Reflections on the first promise in scripture of resurrection, the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. The vision promises resurrection from the dead...and so much more.

It was important to us to view the body. I don't know why, it just was. My brother's death was no surprise; he'd been critically ill for a month or more. We each received the news by phone and made plans to travel to Knoxville. We'd had long conversations with family members. But still, it was important for us to view our brother's body.

"I'm sorry, we can't allow that." He spoke with all the solemn tact of a funeral director. We was, in fact a funeral director. My oldest brother, Jim, arriving the morning of the memorial service, went to the funeral home asking if we might view the remains of the brother we'd both lost. We'd been told there would be no opportunity for this after the service. Although the memorial service would prove to be quite meaningful, this would be our only time to say good-bye to our brother personally.

We'd introduced ourselves and expected to be received with "come and see the body so it will be real for you and you can begin to accept it." Instead, "I'm sorry, we can't allow that." My brother, Jim, is a gentle, Christian man, so I left him in the car as I returned to negotiate this matter with the bleep, bleep funeral director. I don't want to share the content of that conversation, but eventually the director went out to the car to invite Jim to come inside and join me as we visited with our brother.

Two brothers, one embalmed set of remains. It wasn't sufficient to know he had passed; we needed to see it with our eyes. Like Ezekiel in the Valley of Bones. The Spirit could've have instructed Zeke to preach God's promise of resurrection, but God must have known that Ezekiel needed to see it as well as hear about it. So there the prophet stood, before a scene he would never forget—a valley filled with death that would later dance with life.

In Knoxville the family time was warm and affectionate; the memorial service provided comfort and honored my brother's life. The hard part came in the weeks that followed, in phone conversations with his wife.

"I'm doing okay," she would say when I called. Within half a minute she was in tears. "It's so hard. I miss him every single day."

This was not what therapists call "complicated grief." This was grief straight up, simple, pure mourning that follows the loss of a death. And it was hard. But it was not unique. In fact, many of you have been there.

To those of you who have known such grief, complicated or simple, I want to preach something very straightforward: this story of Ezekiel and the Valley of the Dry Bones is about resurrection. In fact, it was the first direct promise in the Bible of resurrection from the dead. It was meant to be a promise to God's people: we have victory over death. You can claim that promise and take hope from it today.

We believe in the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting. In Jesus Christ, whom God raised from the dead, and in this story, countless people have found hope that death is not the end.

So when she says to me through his tears, "I believe I'll see my husband again in heaven. I have to believe it; sometimes it's the only thing that keeps me going," I stand in line with her, with the women at the tomb of Christ, and with Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones to say, "I believe it also." We have God's word.

But there is more. This story of dry bones is too good to stop with that. I want to speak of resurrection from the grave clearly, but I also believe this story offers more. So much more.

Ezekiel viewed, not the carefully prepared body of a family member but skeletons, hundreds of dry, white, sun-bleached, bones filling the valley as far as the eye could see, like the aftermath of a terrible battle. There was nothing "natural"-looking about them. They were dead.

Of course they're dead. Did you expect bones to be alive? Dead bones don't bother me. *Unburied* bones bother me. This valley was filled with unburied bones, still lying around, haunting and disturbing. I have a Valley of Unburied Bones in my own landscape, do you? Things in your past that wounded you and caused you pain, but have never been appropriately buried. Never spoken of, named, dealt with and then put away, but lying there, poisoning and infecting the entire valley.

When we are hurt in our past, especially when we were hurt deeply as children, we can learn to see ourselves as broken or defective in some essential way. We remember with excruciating detail the violations and injustices that devastated our heart; we can come to view our life as a long, terrible mistake.

Here is my message to you: you are not broken. That which hurt you in the past is not a fatal wound, and it did not irrevocably shape your future. Your life is not a problem to be solved; it's a gift to be opened. Remember Ezekiel and the bones that danced.

I have learned that adults who were hurt long ago can exhibit a peculiar strength, a deep inner wisdom, a remarkable insight. Because parts of their past were so dark and painful, they have spent much of their lives cultivating the gentleness, love, and peace they missed then. As a result, they often have a powerful heart, a passionate devotion to healing, a strong compassion for others who are wounded.<sup>1</sup> You are not broken. Your life is not a problem to be solved; it's a gift to be opened.

This usually requires a lot of work and a lot of courage, but it is not a self-help project. It is a gift of a generous God whose grace can bring life into places when all hope is lost. Ezekiel learned that in the Valley of Bones.

In the *Valley of Bones*. I believe in resurrection, but I do not want to deal with it. I believe Jesus has power to raise the dead, only I do not want him practicing on me. I don't want a God who meets me in that valley, I want a God who transports me to the mountaintop. I want a God who will cut my losses and cushion my failures, a God who will grant me a life free from pain. I want a God who will rescue me from suffering and death, who will delete it from the human race and invent another way to operate.

What I get, what all of us get, instead is a God who resurrects from the dead. God works through it instead of working around it. God creates life in the middle of grief, creates love in the middle of loss, creates faith in the middle of despair. Zeke didn't see this vision from the mountaintop; he had to go down there in the valley. His was not a pretty story, but it is a strong one, with power to lead us through the valley and out the other side.

"Can these bones live?" is the question Zeke wrestles with at the beginning. And he offers the right response, the only true response: "God, only you know the answer to that one."<sup>2</sup>

Our lives, our future is in God's hand and God's hand only. Which leaves us without a strategic plan, without a scheme, and without an adequate security system. It leaves us with only hope.

You are aware, of course, that God is not the only one who offers such hope. Ray Moon, age 83, promises you, too, can be ripped like him. [http://cdn-maf1.heartyhosting.com/sites/muscleanfitness.com/files/styles/full\\_node\\_image\\_1\\_090x614/public/Ray-Moon.jpg?itok=dfpF5J47](http://cdn-maf1.heartyhosting.com/sites/muscleanfitness.com/files/styles/full_node_image_1_090x614/public/Ray-Moon.jpg?itok=dfpF5J47) "Sign up for his program and in three short months...!" (Suddenly half the guys in the room are on their smart phones Google searching "Ray Moon, body-building program." I can see you from here, you know. Guys, they don't want Grandpa walking around the house like this: [http://cdn-maf1.heartyhosting.com/sites/muscleanfitness.com/files/styles/full\\_node\\_image\\_1\\_090x614/public/Ray-Moon.jpg?itok=dfpF5J47](http://cdn-maf1.heartyhosting.com/sites/muscleanfitness.com/files/styles/full_node_image_1_090x614/public/Ray-Moon.jpg?itok=dfpF5J47). May I strongly suggest you not go shopping for some Speedo outfits like Ray Moon wears?

There are thousands of offers promising to raise every sort of dry bone in the world. "Lord God, only you have the answer..." Ezekiel had the right response. Who are you going to trust to bring your life back to life? Where are you going to place your hope?

Be careful what you ask for, because hope isn't completely safe. Hope proclaims that the way things appear today is precarious. Hope warns us not to take the present too seriously. Because it will not last. It dares us to find life, not is what we see today but in the Spirit of God who raises dead hopes.

Why do we keep caring for elderly people? Why do we keep visiting patients in hospice facilities? Why do we commit ourselves to the political process when there is so much cynicism and a malaise of despair in politics today. Why? Because God is not done. "God is my rock. God is my strength. God is my salvation."

Let's take our stand beside Ezekiel and proclaim our hope to every dry bone we meet, "Thus says the Lord: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live!" You who gave up hope, you who have settled for a routine life of work, bills, and another load of laundry, you who think your best years are behind you. You who think God has forgotten about your anonymous life. To you God says, "Arise!"

Arise from the heap of discarded dreams. Arise to discover that the Spirit is breathing life back into you. Arise with magnificent hope. Because the world is dying for people to believe God is not done.<sup>3</sup>