

SERMON

I love this season of Pentecost. We hear again from Acts chapter 2 how the Holy Spirit came on those first Disciples, and they poured out into the street and started speaking about the Lord Jesus to all who were there. Thousands heard the gospel message in their own language and were convinced of its truth. Thousands became Christians that day.

I imagine fisherman Peter standing up in front of that great crowd. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he explained so courageously how the death and resurrection of Jesus was all part of God's plan to rescue the people from the power of sin and death. He quoted from one of the psalms of David, that would have been familiar to the Jewish audience and a psalm that we can read for ourselves in full (Psalm 16). It struck me as I read it, that I usually gloss over that part of Peter's speech and yet now I see how relevant it is for us today. Surely it describes so well why our relationship with Jesus gives us hope even in the hardest of times.

25David said about him: "I saw the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. 26Therefore my heart is glad, and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, 27because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. 28You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence." (Acts 2:25-28 NIV)

Yes, all of us can acknowledge that the passing of our loved ones causes separation, pain and grief that is very real, our Christian faith tells us we have no need to fear death for even death cannot separate us from the love of God. Our faith tells us that we shall go through death into the eternal presence of Jesus our risen Lord and Saviour, who has gone before us and waits to welcome us into eternity. Our faith gives us reason for hope and even for joy in the midst of death.

Take a look at your hand. It's pretty amazing. You're looking at: 29 bones, 17 muscles, 2 main arteries, 3 major nerves, 40+ regular nerves, and 123 ligaments. Some say it's the hand not the eye that's the most magnificent part of the human body. The psalmist got it right, we're fearfully and wonderfully made.

All bodies are a balancing act between stability and mobility. The larger the animal, the bigger the bones. Elephants are 13% bone. The small mole-like shrew is 4% skeleton. We human beings are 8.5% bone.

We ask a lot of these bodies of ours—our skeletons need to be both rigid and flexible. We need to stand firm and twist and turn. It's not as easy as it sounds. Bone is stronger than reinforced concrete, yet light enough for us to sprint. Your bones weigh no more than 20 lbs., but they can withstand up to a ton of compression. We generally have 206 bones, but one person in every eight has an extra pair of ribs while those with Down's Syndrome have one less pair. The hands and feet alone take up more than half of our bones. We don't count the small sesamoid bones in the 206 count even though the kneecap or patella is also a sesamoid bone.

Bones do a lot—much more than providing scaffolding for us. They protect our insides, manufacture blood cells, store chemicals, transmit sound (our middle ear), and as recent research

within the last two decades has shown, bones bolster our memory and buoy our spirits. Exercise is good for our bones, not only strengthening them but decreasing our chances of Alzheimer's. Bones don't scar when they heal like our skin does. Bones can even partially grow back. Bones in literature often represent life. We feel something deep inside our bones. Our bones truly are living tissue. Bones need to be connected, so tendons connect muscles to bone and ligaments connect bone to bone.

We also can't forget cartilage—it's truly amazing. There's nothing quite like it on earth, both smooth and strong. Each time in worship we ask you stand, you're using 100 of your 600 muscles.

Which leads us to our Scripture reading this Pentecost Sunday. It's a vision that represents the people of God transformed from dry, scattered bones to a vast multitude, set free to serve the living God.

Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones

God calls Ezekiel to come and take a tour of the destruction that surrounds. In the midst of all the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of despair, God asks – 'can these bones live?' When God asks the same of us, we need not be any more sure than Ezekiel who responded – God, you know. And so we ask questions of what it means to act on hope that we don't yet feel, to examine the destruction revealed around us, and to potentially rise again as a new collective body.

Can these dry bones come to life again?

In our Scripture, the prophet Ezekiel is seized by the hand of God and moved by the Spirit to a vision of a boneyard in a valley. Scattered bones were bleached white and dried out by the desert sun. It's a haunted place of catastrophe—likely a battlefield defeat. The bodies were not given proper burial. It's a place of utter hopelessness. Yet God already promised the prophet Ezekiel in the chapter before: the ruined cities will be crowded with people once more.

But their present was a different story from their future. The vision God gave to the prophet Ezekiel was a picture of the shattered remains of a people in exile for more than ten years. God gave Ezekiel and the people of Israel a guided tour of their problems. There was no sugar coating going on here—no bones about it. Faith first requires honesty, a recognition of reality. Honesty: this is a hopeless situation. There are no signs of life.

Can these bones live? I like Ezekiel's response to God's question. He didn't give the Sunday School answer of "Yes, of course God!" In other words, he avoided the arrogance and presumption of a superficial answer. Ezekiel also didn't say, "No, of course not God, you know, and I know they're dead." The prophet didn't succumb to unbelief and cynicism either. Ezekiel knew God as Creator, the Author of Life, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. So, Ezekiel humbly responded, "You alone know God." Hear the good news Immanuel: God is the God of the impossible. Our God is in the restoration business. Jesus in the resurrection business. God's Spirit has the life-giving power to turn a valley of dry bones into a restored and revived people. It's all God, yet he invites not just our observation of this miracle, but our participation, to have some skin in the game.

Engage and join in God's re-creation. Along with Ezekiel, God summons us to step out in faith and join God in the impossible, to even look a little silly. Preach to the dry bones. Pray to the wind. Prophecy to the people. And with Ezekiel, we obey God's command. We have the audacity to believe God's Spirit can breathe new life into the dispirited. Notice that God's miracle came in two stages. In the first phase there was a rattling and shaking of bones getting reconnected, bone to bone. Then came sinews, ligaments, tendons, cartilage, and flesh returned.

Decomposition is reversed—this is re-composition. Regeneration. Yet there was no breath in these new bodies. They remained on the floor of the valley. You can have: the skeleton to provide structure, tendons and ligaments to provide unity and togetherness, muscles that provide strength and resources, and skin for protection and appearance, but if you don't have the life-giving breath of God's Spirit, you're just a hunk of flesh, a bag of bones. But Ezekiel obeyed again, and this time prophesied to the wind, and God's breath resuscitated the flesh and bones. Their eyes opened. They stood on their feet using their new 100 muscles—a vast multitude, but with God's Ruach, which in Hebrew means spirit, breath, and wind. With the Spirit, God's animating power brings motion. The improbable and impossible happens in the most unpromising of places. Miracles happen where there is not health, but brokenness.

There's so much to be gleaned from this passage: First, God intervenes. The hand of the Lord took hold of Ezekiel. God grabs hold of us as well and takes us to new places. Second, God speaks. God not only listens to our prayers, but God speaks to us. We just need to listen. God not only speaks, but God acts. Third, God invites our speaking. God invites us to speak, to believe, to trust, to obey, to witness, and to prophecy to the people for the impossible. Preach to the dead bones. Pray to the wind. Prophecy to the people. It's an act of courage to believe God can reverse the curse. To really believe the status quo isn't the final say. God can re-enchant our disenchantment. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Pentecost reminds us how much we need the Spirit. The Hebrew word Ruach is used 10x in this passage. This divine "air motion" breathes new life in us, gets us on our feet again, revives our deflated dispositions and emotions. This is what God has been doing since the very beginning.

God is doing the same today with God's chosen people, where we're enlivened and energized by the Spirit to keep praying, prophesying, preaching, and healing in situations of despair. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit dwells in us, giving us an incarnational faith that relates with others and an inspirational faith that is God-breathed. Something greater than us is at work here. As Isaiah tells us, the spirit of God comes upon us, for a purpose, for a mission, giving us wisdom and insight, counsel and power, knowledge, and the awe of God. Not just facts about God, but knowledge of God. A relationship. Peter tells us in his Pentecost preaching, that the Spirit rests upon us by God's grace to prophecy and to see visions and dream dreams. This is not just for prophets, but for all God's people, sons, and daughters, young and old, men and women, rich and poor.

The Spirit instills hope and a future and a purpose in our lives, individually as believers and collectively as a people. We have new potential, new possibility with the Spirit in us that we never had before. God puts us back on our feet again, gives us a second wind when the wind has been knocked out of us and we're short of breath. We're enlivened to enjoy life, energized to obey, and

serve. We're given a new work to do. As the Psalmist says, "You've delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the Lord in the land of the living."

We can tear up those old scripts and narratives we rehearse and repeat to ourselves over and over: Our bones are dried up. Our hope is dead. We're doomed, nothing will change. We're finished. For each defeated response we have, God responds with an affirmation: I will get you out, I will lift you up, and I will bring you back. Then God says to us, Look. See what I am doing. Take a closer look. Believe my miracles. Your exile is over. A new exodus has begun. I will roll away the stone from your tomb. I will lift you up from your grave. I will bring you back home.

The term, "saved by the bell" is an interesting one. In bygone generations, a bell was sometimes included in a coffin. If you happened to be prematurely thought for dead, you could ring that bell to let people know you were alive, and they would furiously dig to get you out. But with God, God rings the bell. Waking us from our slumber and bringing us back into the land of the living. God's word spoken over us speaks life into our dead situations, speaks life to our dead relationships.

You are delivered and set free. Be birthed again out of your tomb. Don't stay there. Cry out like a child of God and breathe deep the breath of God! Live into the abundant and eternal life God offers, even now. You can know, really know the living God. We are God's people, and you are a new creation. God has spoken and he will make good on his word, once again. Amen.