

Looking Upward, Part 2
"Is the Impossible, Possible?"
John 20: 19-22, Ezekiel 37:1-14
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John 20: 19-22

¹⁹On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²²And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit...."

Introduction to OT

Ezekiel was a prophet who lived approximately 600 years before Jesus. He lived during the period of Israel's Babylonian captivity, a challenging period in the life of God's people. The following, is a vision God gives Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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. ²He 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. ³He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these

bones: I will make breath^[a] enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I 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.”

⁷So 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. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, "Prophesy 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.'" ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹Then 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.' ¹²Therefore 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.¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I 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.”

PRAY.

As a college student, I was friends with two guys who had a sweet deal. Free rent. But, yes, there was a catch. They had a spacious apartment in a great location. It was upstairs, over garages...owned by a mortuary. They lived there rent free, with the agreement that if a call came in between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. they would drive one of the hearses and go pick up the body. That's it!

Well one night a call came in. Byron had pulled an all-nighter the previous night, writing a term paper, so he was really tired. He talked his roommate Chris into driving, while he—Byron—took a nap in the back of the hearse.

Because he was so tired, Bryon fell right to sleep. The pickup location was some distance away and Chris realized the vehicle was low on gas, so he pulled into a gas station.

When it came to a stop, Byron awoke and sat up to see where they were. Looking out the window, he was eyeball to eyeball with the gas station attendant, who took off running! Needless to say, we too would be surprised to find life in a place associated with death.

Of course there is nothing funny about death. It has a sobering affect on us.

About 6 years ago I had the privilege of attending a Peacemaking conference hosted by Presbyterian women of Rwanda. They invited female church leaders of Central Africa to their country, because of their desire to share some deep truths learned as a result of their experience of genocide in 1994. On our 4th day together the group took a field trip to visit the Genocide Memorial on a hillside in the capital city of Kigali.

Rwanda is a small country, but when the genocide broke out, the slaughter was everywhere...no one was immune. In less than one month, nearly one million Tutsi's were brutally murdered and nearly two million more became refugees, fleeing for their lives to neighboring countries. It constituted an ethnic cleansing by Hutu tribal group.

While efforts had been made to prepare us for what we would see and experience at the memorial, in actuality, it is nearly impossible to do so. How does one prepare to see a room filled from floor to ceiling with rows and rows of photographs of individuals who were killed? How does one prepare to see a room filled with a pile of human skulls? Or, in the memorial garden where the remains of 250,000 people are buried, to see through a glass window, the collective bones stacked neatly in an ossuary below ground level?

It literally took my breath away! (Breath-taking!)

Today we are considering a passage from the OT Prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was God's messenger to the people of Israel during a difficult time in their history. The prophets had issued repeated warnings to the people regarding returning to keep God's ways or suffer the consequences. After numerous warnings and their repeated flagrant disobedience, the judgement of God was finally visited upon them.

The Babylonian armies pillaged their towns and villages, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and took thousands of Israelites captive, carrying them off into slavery in Babylon. There for seventy years, an entire generation, they were cut off from *everything* familiar. The language, food, culture, and religion—*everything was different!* Imagine how disorienting that would be, to be plunged into an entirely different culture, and stuck there as a slave.

Their grief and sense of loss must have been incredibly deep. In fact according to v. 11, "They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' Divorced...devastated...desperate...dead.

Ezekiel describes an experience in which the "hand of the Lord" was upon him, and the Spirit of the Lord transports him –if only in a dream or vision—to a valley filled with dry bones. Death resides in this place. The remains of countless people are scattered about. It must have been like visiting the genocide memorial or the holocaust memorial. Thousands of unidentified lifeless dry bones were everywhere.

God asks Ezekiel what is surely a rhetorical question: "Son of man, can these bones live?"

"Really? You're kidding, right God??" (That is my answer!)

Ezekiel is more diplomatic: "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." (Good answer!)

Then God asks Ezekiel to do something totally crazy (that's a big theological word, meaning "nuts"!) God tells Ezekiel to prophesy or preach in that valley to all those dried up bones! (To prophesy is to "forth-tell" NOT "foretell"!)

Now any preacher will tell you that there are occasions when she feels like he/she's trying to wake the dead, but really? This is extreme!

But **God** is doing the asking or the commanding at this point, so Ezekiel does not equivocate, he cooperates! Ezekiel obeys. What does he say? Exactly what God tells him to:

" `Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I 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."

What happens next is like science fiction!

He describes "a rattling noise" as the random bones, spread out all over the valley, re-form, first, into complete skeletons. Then tendons, muscles, and finally skin cover them BUT there is **no breath** in them. Once filled with dry bones, now the valley is filled with corpses! *Without breath, they are dead!*

Nine times in these 14 verses, there is a variation of one Hebrew word: *ruah*, which means Spirit, wind, breath, breathe. (This word is translated in Greek, *pneuma*. It means exactly the same thing.)

Next, God instructs Ezekiel to speak, commanding the Spirit - the "four winds"- to fill the lungs of these corpses and bring them back to life! When

he does so, it happens. ***The dead become alive as the Spirit breathes the breath of life into them!***

Then, God offers this explanation: These dry bones represent the exiled Israelites who were captive, devastated, hopeless. God promises to do for this nation, what has been done in this vision—breathe new life into them!

God promises to restore the people to their homeland—and by doing so, they will **know** beyond a shadow of a doubt, WHO God is—*One who is a life-giving God, and a promise-keeping God!*

(In time this prophecy is fulfilled. The Israelites *do* return to their homeland, and they *do* experience new life.)

What might we learn from this vision in the valley?

First, God is still concerned about dead, dry, disjointed people. *He's concerned about those who feel lifeless and hopeless.* Jesus himself said: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) In light of recent celebrity suicides (Kate Spade, Anthony Bourdain) and one in our own community, it gives us pause. There are people who appear to be alive on the outside, but who are feeling so desperate on the inside, that they would take such drastic action. Suicide is a permanent solution to what is a temporary problem. We need to be sensitive to those around us, be discerning observers and listeners. We need to take action to connect others with available mental health services.

Second, we can't do anything of lasting value without the breath of God. [Jesus says "apart from me you can do nothing"...Vine and branches metaphor.] By whose power are you living your life? By whose power are you utilizing your spiritual gifts? Your own? **Does it feel like you are going through the motions, that something is lacking?** God's desire is to fill us—empower us--and help us to move with the breath of God.

Third, nothing happens in the church until the wind blows. Nothing happens until the Holy Spirit of God blows across the face of the church,

enlivening and energizing his people. This was true the night the resurrected Jesus “breathed” on the disciples in the upper room. It is equally true today—we can fill the church calendar with activities, but nothing of eternal value happens until the Wind of God comes into our lives, enabling us to do in our ministries what we could not do without his breath.

Fourth and finally, it is God's desire that the people **know** that he is God. Over and over again you read in the book of Ezekiel, "They will *know* that I am the Lord. I will do this/that, and they will **know** that I am the Lord."

The word translated as “**know**” in the Hebrew, **does NOT mean to know God intellectually, with our minds (facts about God)**. It is the same word used by the author of Genesis, where it says “**Adam knew Eve**...and she conceived/became pregnant”. (Genesis 4:1)

In other words, God desires an intimacy and depth of relationship with each one of us, that we can know and be known by God—with the **whole** of our beings!

Another way of thinking about this, is described in chapter 36 of Ezekiel.

The people of Israel had developed a pattern of worshipping other gods/idols of surrounding pagan religions. God’s solution to this is to go deep, and to change not their minds, but their hearts. In the Hebrew culture, the heart was the center of the will, the place out of which decisions were made, not the mind!

That being the case, God says to them, “**I will give you a new heart and put a new ruach**”—*breath, wind, spirit*—“**in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit**”— *my wind, my breath*—“**in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.**” *Ezekiel 36:26-27*

This new heart is oriented first toward God and desiring to please God and do God's will.

The Social Security Administration must deal with discontinuing benefits each year to over 2 million recipients who die each year. However, they have been known to incorrectly enter as many as 14,000 names in their online data base. That is to say that living people are reported as dead.

For instance, Laura Brooks, a 52 year old mother of two, suddenly stopped receiving disability checks. Before she knew it, a loan payment and rent check bounced. She went to the bank and discovered that her account had been closed because she was dead. She was told that the bank would only reopen her account if she could prove that she was alive! (I'm not making this up!) *source: Blake Ellis, "Social Security Wrongly Declares 14,000 People Dead Each Year" (8-17-11) www.cnnmoney.com*

If you and I were in a similar situation but were required to prove that we are alive--not physically but spiritually--how would we make our case?

Are we dry bones? Are we without hope?

I trust the answer is 'NO'!

Filled with the Spirit of God—Knowing God deep in our hearts and with the whole of our being—may we share our hope with the hopeless, and the abundant life that Christ promises, with those who are dying!

PRAY