

# *The Bones Came To Life*

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

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Our passage this morning tells us of a valley full of bones. I don't know about you, but I'd rather keep as far away from bones as possible. There is a television show named *Bones*, and it is a medical/crime series. Invariably the episodes begin with folks doing something normal, like taking a hike, or throwing a ball in a field, or digging in a garden, or cleaning out a yard, and without any warning they come upon...bones. A skeleton. A skull. A jawbone. No matter what bones it is, it always gives me a start and a scare. Whether it's the femur or the fibula, the trapezium or the tibia, the vomer from that ancient poet Homer, or the inferior nasal concha from the Man of La Mancha, it doesn't really matter...bones scare me. When that skeleton appears I jump in fear.

So what are we to do with the vision God gives to the prophet Ezekiel? God shows him a valley, and it is a valley full of bones. Dry bones. There isn't a bit of life left in them. We can imagine it was a gruesome scene. Was it scary? It was certainly horrible. How do we know that? We know because those bones represented the death experience of the people of Israel. Those weren't just anybody's bones. Those bones were the remnants of a people who had been proud and blessed and now they were shamed and disgraced. Those bones were all that remained of the temple, that beautiful house of worship and religious ritual; all that remained of the city that had been crushed; all that remained of the nation whose sovereignty has been extinguished. No longer were there lands and harvests and rivers and streams, no trees or vines, no livestock and herds, all that remained was bones. Dry bones. A whole valley filled with dry bones. This truly is a horror story. The people of God had been defeated and captured and carried into exile, living as servants in the land of Babylon.

What happens in that valley of dry bones transforms this from a scary, frightening, horrible place of desperation into a scene of hope and restoration and even resurrection. The dry bones come to life. They don't just come to life, they do it in a way that flips this story from one of horror and fright into an almost comical depiction of bones rattling together, miraculously becoming attached and joined with tendons and covered with flesh and skin. What was Ezekiel thinking as the valley of dry bones started to shake, rattle, and roll, as bones were rising from the ground and smashing together and forming bodies that were soon covered in flesh and skin and then receiving the breath of the Spirit so that eventually these dead bones were standing on their feet and they had formed a vast army. No wonder the old spiritual rings out in a triumph of hope, "Dem bones gonna rise again."

When something as wonderfully bizarre as the valley of dry bones comes to life, it seems like there ought to be some powerful celebrating and singing and shouting for joy. Dry bones don't come to life. That's just not natural. So when they do come to life, let's sing and shout and jump and dance. What starts out horrible and scary and frightening ends up hopeful and joyful and full of delight. Dead bones send a shiver down our spine. But dead bones that come to life, filled with the breath and the spirit of God that causes our heart to race and our pulse to quicken. God is at work, and if the graves open up, stand back and let there be life.

How the dry bones come to life is instructive. Ezekiel stands staring at the valley of dry bones when the Lord asks him a question. "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel's answer is perfect. He knows he can't make them live. He could pick up those bones and rub them together and do some chants and use some string or twine to tie them up, and yet if it is up to Ezekiel, up to the prophet, up to a human being, no, no these bones cannot live. But Ezekiel is in the presence of God. It is God who is asking the question of whether the bones can live. So instead of saying no, Ezekiel says, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know." God, this one's on you. I've got nothing. I'm not in the bone rattling business. But you, but you, the Sovereign Lord, you alone know. Ezekiel might well have said, "With you all things are possible." I've got nothing, but God, O Sovereign Lord, you have everything.

When Ezekiel was in the valley of dry bones, it is God who asks him, "Can these bones live?" I wonder who does the asking when we are in the valley of dry bones. When we are facing death or loss, when a relationship has ended abruptly, and painfully, when the addiction grabs hold with a deadly force, when we fall off the wagon, when our dreams are crushed, when we are the ones living in exile, when we are the ones living in the valley of dry bones, is it God asking, "Can these bones live?" It seems to me we often take up that question. In desperation we turn to God, in desperation we cry out, staring at the valley of dry bones, I think we are the ones who cry out to God, "Can these bones live?" At that moment we are just like Ezekiel. We've got nothing. We can't do a thing with the dry bones except weep and moan and cry out in despair. That is why this passage in Ezekiel is so important for us, for surely we all face the valley of dry bones at one time or another. Ezekiel knows he doesn't have any power to make those dry bones live. But he doesn't rule out God's power to make those dry bones live.

I know the discouragement of facing the valley of dry bones. I know the helpless feeling of having nothing, not one idea, not one solution, not one ounce of power to change those dry bones into anything other than dry bones. Those dry bones lie scattered on the ground taunting us to give up, to pack it in, to run, to hide, to cower in fear. But pay attention to this story, for even when we've got nothing, God has the ability to bring dry bones to life.

I came across a story this week that literally fell into my lap. I was referencing a journal for some information about Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. When I opened the journal, another smaller magazine fell out that had been tucked into the pages of the journal. An article caught my attention. I was drawn to it by the title, "Unplanned Ministry." I have come to realize that in the unplanned ministries of life God is often tapping me on the shoulder and saying, "Pay attention." So I read this article. It was about a man living in the valley of dry bones. He had been in federal prison for five years, the result of trafficking drugs in and out of Mexico. He had been addicted to drugs, in particular the drug cocaine. He was also an alcoholic. You can imagine his life was filled with just a few dry bones. He was now out of prison and had moved back to his hometown. As part of his parole he still had to spend weekends in the local jail, but he was free to work and be about the community during the week. An addict, an alcoholic, a man who served time in prison, a man even now on parole, I think he might have looked at his life and wondered, "Can these bones live?"

The man asked his girlfriend, a woman named Donna, to call a local pastor, and ask the pastor if her boyfriend could come and talk to the pastor. The pastor agreed. The woman brought the man to the church to meet the pastor. The man's name was Jackson. Jackson told the pastor, "In the middle of the night I woke up, and my cell was full of light—a kind of pulsating light. It lasted maybe five minutes...it seemed like a long time. And then it was dark again. I was still in my bunk wondering what had happened, and then it came to me: I think I'm a Christian. But I have no idea what that means. I don't know any Christians. Donna thought you might be someone I could talk to." As he told the story Jackson realized it was strange enough that he felt compelled to tell the pastor there were no drugs involved. He said, "I haven't used cocaine for over five years."

Eugene Peterson, the pastor, and Jackson, the man recently released from prison, started meeting together once a week to talk about what it means to be a Christian. They met over lunch. About six weeks into it Jackson asked, "Don't Christians pray before they eat?" Peterson said yes, most do. Jackson asked, "Well, why aren't we doing it?" Peterson said he didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable since Jackson wasn't used to that kind of thing. Jackson said, "If this is what Christians do, we better do it." So Peterson started praying at their meals. Then one week he said, "Jackson, you pray this time." The pastor said,

“Jackson looked at me hard, stared in disbelief. And then he bowed his head and prayed. He prayed a long time. When he finally said Amen, he looked up and said, ‘I’ve never done that before.’” From then on they took turns praying. One week it was Jackson’s turn. They had ordered soup. After the soup was served, Jackson bowed his head low over the soup. The waitress brought bread she had forgotten earlier and said, “Is something the matter with the soup?” Jackson, with his head still bowed and his eyes tightly shut, turned his faced toward her and said, louder than needed to be said, “We’re praying.” Eugene Peterson, the pastor, said there was no way to be an anonymous Christian when you were in the company of Jackson.

Time passed. One day Jackson told Peterson he was given a tract that talked about the tith-ee. He wanted to know about the tith-ee. Peterson explained how the tithe signaled the practice of giving 10 percent of your income as an offering to God. Jackson decided if that is what Christians did, he had better do it. But since he was in jail on weekends he asked if he could give it to Peterson. And then he asked again how you pronounce that funny word...tith-ee. Week after week they met, exploring the ins and outs of being a Christian. After six months Jackson completed his weekend stints in jail and he started coming to church. Jackson was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, and so one of the conditions of his parole was that he had to go to AA and NA meetings. In these meetings Jackson kept talking about where he went to church, and soon others from the recovery program were coming to the church. The story doesn’t end with anything dramatic, but Jackson and Donna, the woman who first introduced him to Peterson, they decide to get married. So they get married. That’s how the article ends. The story doesn’t have a dramatic ending.<sup>1</sup>

That is the good news. When dry bones come to life, it is not an ending, it is a beginning. And here a man who had every reason to cry out to God, “Can these bones live?” is finding out that yes, dry bones can live. In Christ Jesus there is new creation. The old, the dead, the dying, is gone, and right where there once was a pile of dry bones, God has been rattling and shaking and knitting and binding and attaching bones and ligaments and tendons, through things like meeting together to talk about faith, learning to pray, even to pray rather loudly over a bowl of soup, learning about tithing and giving, learning about going to church, learning about telling others about the hope you have found and inviting others to come with you to church to learn about God and new life, and even standing at an altar and making promises about being faithful in marriage. No, the story does not have a dramatic ending. It is just this beautiful and wonderful beginning of a new life where once there were dry bones.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, “Unplanned Ministry”, The Christian Century, February 8, 2011, pp.32-34.

I'm scared of bones. I get scared when the bones jump out during television shows and movies. I get scared when I look at a valley of dry bones. But we don't have to be scared of dry bones. And we don't have to give in to fear and hopelessness when there are dry bones, even a valley of them. God asks a question of Ezekiel, and God asks a question of us. "Can these bones live?" God asks the question of us, but he knows full well we don't have the answer. We don't have the ability. So the one who asks the question becomes the one who answers, and his answer is powerful, and hopeful, and if you pay attention and trust this God, you will find out that his answer is yes. The bones live. Get ready people. There's some rattling going on even now. Get ready people. There's a whole lot of shaking going on. Get ready people, those dry bones are coming to life. For with Jesus Christ, dry bones can life.