

# Can These Bones Live?

## Ezekiel 37:1-14

Wayne Eberly

March 29, 2020

Lent is not an easy journey. Maybe this year with the Coronavirus it is a particularly difficult journey, but even without the virus, Lent is never an easy journey. We begin with ashes and are reminded that from dust we came and to dust we will return. We make the journey of Lent following in the footsteps of Jesus, fully understanding what awaited him in Jerusalem.

In the gospel of Luke, we are told Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. In that same gospel Jesus warns his disciples, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” (Luke 9:22) Later, he tells the Twelve, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.” (Luke 18:31-33)

Maybe because Lent is such a difficult journey, such a serious journey, such an ominous journey, the lectionary gives us a brief stop with Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. With all the images Jesus gives of his imminent suffering and death, maybe the clank and rattle of dry bones is meant to give us a little comic relief. Of course, it is macabre humor, but the image of tendons being attached to bones, and then flesh covering it all up is bizarre enough to evoke at least a little laughter.

I’m a big fan of a singer named Bobby Pickett. Bobby was not particularly famous, but on one day of the year, Bobby rises to the top of all the rock and roll icons. Nobody knows Bobby Pickett by the name Bobby, but on Halloween you might recognize him as Bobby “Boris” Pickett. His famous song is The Monster Mash. If Ezekiel is meant to be comic relief during this difficult season of Lent, I invite you to imagine what Bobby “Boris” Pickett of Monster Mash fame could have done with the Valley of Dry Bones. Cue the sound of boiling cauldrons, howling goblins, and clanking bones...

**I was reading in Ezekiel late last night when my eyes beheld an eerie sight  
In a valley filled with bones so dry they came alive and they started to rise  
Dem Bones attached...new life was hatched  
Dem bones attached...it was a graveyard smash  
Dem bones attached...it caught on in a flash  
Dem bones attached...Dem ol’ dry bones attached**

Hmmm...the Valley of Dry Bones as comic relief...maybe yes...but probably no. What if the Valley of Dry Bones is not presented to us as comic relief? What if Ezekiel shows us a picture of reality, a reality we all have to face? What if Ezekiel shows us a picture of death, pure and simple, and tells us, "We all have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

Friends, Jerusalem is not just for Jesus. We are all on a journey marked by death. As we journey, God shows us a valley of dry bones. And God has a question for us. "Can these bones live?"

Jayber Crow is the town barber in Port William, Kentucky. Jayber is a fictional character in a fictional town. The story of *Jayber Crow* is written by Wendell Berry. The story is fiction. Fiction is by definition not true. But I tell you, for a fictional story, there is a whole lot of truth in Jayber Crow. Jayber Crow is a profound story. It is a beautiful story. It is a story with plenty of comic relief. And I tell you, for a story that is fictional it has some moments that make you search your soul.

Jayber is the town barber, but there are not enough heads of hair in Port William, Kentucky for him to support himself, so when he is asked to be the gravedigger for the small town, he accepts the responsibility. The story of Jayber Crow begins in the 1930's and the decades that follow. There was no backhoe back then for Jayber to use in the graveyard. Jayber would show up early for funerals and dig a hole in the ground, just the right length, the right width, the right depth. Then when the hymns were sung, the words spoken, and the final amen uttered, and after the dead body was placed in the grave, Jayber would fill in the hole.

Jayber grew to like the job. Jayber grew to take pride in the graveyard. Over time, Jayber became familiar with all the dry bones he would walk over. Jayber buried plenty of folks, and he would read the markers of the ones he did not know. In that small town, they had something called Decoration Day. It was a day when the whole community would come out and place flowers on the markers of their loved ones. Everyone would work together to get the cemetery looking real nice. Jayber could come out and lend a hand.

One year on Decoration Day all the folks had finished decorating, and one by one they all headed home. Jayber, who was also the town barber, was getting ready to go back to his barber shop. But Jayber noticed that someone was still in the graveyard. It was a woman named Mattie. Mattie was slumped over a marker. It was the marker of her daughter Liddie. Liddie had been run over in an accident when she was just five years old. Now Mattie, this lonely mother, was weeping at the grave, spread out on the ground, literally trying to cover her sorrow, or perhaps make a vain effort to get a little closer to her dear little daughter whom she had lost. Jayber watched Mattie cry. As he watched his own heart was breaking in sorrow. Then

Jayber realized Mattie was stuck there. She was stuck in her grief. The gravedigger came up to her and said, “Mattie.” He said it again. “Mattie.” Then Jayber put his hand on her shoulder and said, “You can’t stay her.”

Dry bones. They’re everywhere. A marriage dries up, a job disappears, a relationship crumbles, a dream gets dashed. How many high school seniors are watching their final semester get put on hold, and maybe called off all together? How many travelers have found their itinerary has suddenly changed, or been completely canceled? How many birthday parties, how many weddings, how many family outings, how many work events, how many games and dances and recitals and...with each event canceled you can hear a rattle, you can hear a crumbling, you can hear a crashing. Dry bones. Dry bones. Dry bones.

I was with a group once. We were seated in a circle. One by one people told a story of struggle, a story of loss, a story of death in one form or another.

“My marriage died...

“My mother died...

“Our newborn babies died...

“I was a teenager when my world fell apart...

As each one shared, they held up their dry bones and slowly placed them in the middle of our circle. Have you ever been in a circle like that? Among people who talked honestly about the places in life where they had been broken, about the losses they had experienced? There are times in the Body of Christ where we rejoice with those who rejoice...and there are times when we weep with those who weep. After everyone had piled their dry bones in a heap, right there in the middle, we were faced with a question. “Can these bones live?”

Maybe it would surprise you, and then again, maybe it would not surprise you, but after all these dry bones were piled up in a heap, people started to talk about how God had been at work even in the dark and desperate times of life. As these friends talked you could hear a rattling sound. Right before our eyes, bones came together, bone upon bone, tendons attached, and flesh materialized. Then the Holy Spirit breathed right into that room and brought life...life that came out of death. Dry bones can live. Dry bones can live.

But here is the thing about dry bones. Dry bones cannot live again unless they have died. You do not get a pile of bones until there has been a death, in one form or another. So today we are making a pit stop with Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. This pit stop is not an accident. It is not a detour. This pit stop is not an interlude or a moment of comic relief. If we want to get to Easter, we have to go through the valley of dry bones. We have to go through death. The only way to resurrection is through the valley marked death.

Sometimes when you go through that valley, it seems like it will never end. The dry bones stretch on as far as the eye can see. Each morning you wake up and those dry bones are still there. You cry a bucket of tears, and those dry bones are still there. Day after day after day.

That's what got me when I was reading about Jayber Crow, the town barber in Port William, just a fictional man in a fictional town. He moonlighted as the gravedigger. He saw this woman named Mattie weeping at her daughter's grave. That's right. She was smack dab in the middle of the valley of dry bones. He called her name. "Mattie." He called it again. "Mattie." Then he put his hand on her shoulder. And he said to her, "You can't stay here."

If you find yourself in the valley of dry bones, I'd like to do something today. I'd like to put my hand on your shoulder. You might believe that all you will ever feel again is death. You might be ready to throw yourself on the grave marker in your life, to throw yourself on the sadness or death or loss or failure you have experienced. You might be ready to throw yourself down on that marker and just cry until your days are done. But today I want to put my hand on your shoulder. I want to say to you, "You can't stay here."

The journey of Lent takes us into the valley of dry bones. But it does not stop in the valley of dry bones. The journey of Lent keeps going. Lent follows Jesus all the way to the cross. Lent is never less than that. Lent takes us to the cross, never less than that. But Lent is always more than that. Lent takes us clear through until we come to a garden. For all we know that garden is a valley of dry bones. There is a tomb in that garden. A dead body has been placed in that tomb. As far as anyone knows, the tomb is full of dry bones. That is all anyone knows until that first Sunday morning. That is all anyone knows until that first Easter.

On Easter morning the tomb is empty. The dry bones are gone. At the tomb, a woman is bent over. At the tomb a woman is crying. At the tomb a woman is weeping. She could be any one of us. She could be every one of us. But that morning someone is working in the garden. It could have been a gravedigger. The woman herself thought it was the gardener. She thought it was the gardener until he called her name. "Mary." He called her name, "Mary," and then she knew. Dry bones can live again. The one who was calling her name was Jesus. He was alive.

He was alive. He is alive. Jesus is alive. Jesus is reaching out to call your name. You might be stuck in the valley of dry bones. But Jesus is there with you. Jesus is calling you. Jesus is calling you by name. Jesus is reaching out his hand to touch you. Jesus is touching you, and Jesus is saying to you, "You can't stay here."

No, we can't stay here in the valley of dry bones. We are on a journey. We are walking with Jesus. The journey takes us to real places. The journey takes us to the valley of dry bones. But the journey goes forward. Jesus goes to the cross. On the cross Jesus experiences the reality of death Jesus suffers and dies. We watch his death. We see how much God loves us. God loves us so much he would send his one and only Son. We see how God loves us so much that Jesus dies on the cross. We see Jesus die and we cry out, "Can these bones live?" Oh...oh...oh yes...dry bones can live. Just wait until Easter. Just wait until resurrection day.

So today we are in the valley of dry bones. But Jesus is calling our name. He is putting his hand on our shoulder. He has a word for us. "You can't stay here." This is not the end of our journey Jesus says, "Come with me We have a garden to get to." Or as the old spiritual says, "Dem bones gonna rise again."