

Skeletons in the Living Room
A Sermon for April 2, 2017
Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45
Lansdowne UMC

Katie and I moved to Catonsville just as she was starting medical school. There were a couple of precocious children in our new neighborhood whose houses shared the alley with ours. They had started a newspaper called “The Alley Times” that they would put out monthly featuring news and stories that they thought would be of interest to their neighbors. One day, they decided to knock on our door to see if their new neighbors would be interviewed for the next issue. Katie answered the door and let them come in.

Did I mention that Katie had just started medical school? Well, the very first course she had to take was anatomy. Since the human skeleton is quite complex, each student was issued a large black trunk containing a full human skeleton. Yes, medical school can get creepy. Well, my beautiful bride had just received her bone box that very day. You’re all thinking, “I knew the pastor had some skeletons in his closet!” Well, no. You see, knowing that her husband would get home shortly, and looking to show off her recent acquisitions, Katie had artfully placed a skull and a hand on top of the trunk... right in the middle of our living room. Of course she got busy with some other things and forgot that she had done this by the time she answered the door and welcomed our industrious little neighbors.

The young reporter sat down and launched right into her interview. “So when did you move to the community? Where did you live before? What is your favorite thing about the neighborhood so far?” Meanwhile... the young editor had noticed Katie’s display. His head

toward the bones, then back to Katie, then back to the bones. Eventually the courageous boy found his voice and asked, “....why are there *bones?*”

We don't expect to see *dead* things in the *living* room. And so we come to this passage in Ezekiel and maybe it's a bit surprising to see God's people described as bones. So why are there bones? Well, God had given Israel everything it needed. God had taken them out of their slavery in the land of Egypt and placed them in the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. God had given them victory over their enemies, established them in the land, and given them a unique pattern of living to show the world that the Lord was their God, and so that they would flourish in the land that God had given to them. But God was very clear-- if you turn away from me, you'll lose all of it. Sometimes the Bible talks about this as punishment. Other times it seems to be the matter-of-fact reality of how the world would work when they ceased to worship God alone. Regardless there is this link between the state of Israel's spiritual life and the state of their life as a nation.

Well, as is the fallen human tendency, Israel did exactly what God had warned against. And it didn't take long before what God said would happen came true. The Babylonians came and decimated Israel's military, captured their cities, and deported their upper class to Babylon. Ezekiel was taken from his home when he was about 25 years old, along with thousands of Judah's elite. Immediately among the exiles in Babylon false prophets started popping up, declaring that things would get better soon-- peace would come soon. In fact, things were going to get worse before they got better. Jerusalem itself would be captured. Only when Ezekiel hears that Jerusalem has been destroyed does the hope start to emerge from God.

And so with defeat piled upon defeat, God showed Ezekiel this vision of the valley of bones. Why are there bones? Because Israel has been physically and spiritually defeated so fully, that death is the only way to describe how bad their state is. And the bones are dry. They've been dead for so long that they've gotten bleached by the sun. And here's the thing: the fact that they're dead dishonors God. Other people would look at these people who worshiped this supposedly all-powerful God and say "their god couldn't even keep them in their land." And so for God's own sake, God decides to do something about it.

And if God is going to restore this people back to their land, there is going to have to be a spiritual resurrection. God is going to have to bring them back to a place of faithfulness. God is going to have to put them back together, bone by bone. God is going to have to put muscles and tendons on their bones and cover them with skin. But there is still a problem. God could stitch back together the spiritual corpses of Israel, but that didn't mean that they'd be able to live in the land. They'd just be open graves, they wouldn't be living, breathing images of God's faithfulness. And so in order to return from exile and live in the land, they would need to be faithful once more to God's Instruction. How was that going to work? Well, God will have to single-handedly work that out. God described how it would happen in the previous chapter of Ezekiel:

[God's going to move them] 24 I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.

[God's going to clean them up] 25 I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

[And God's going to help them be faithful] 26 A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit [a new breath] I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put my spirit [my breath] within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. 28 Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.¹

Wind, breath, and spirit are all the same word in Hebrew. So when God says I'm going to put a new spirit in you, that's God saying I'm going to put breath in your spiritual lungs so that you can come to life. "The Spirit *is* life," Paul says in Romans 8.

That's a lot of history, I know. But what's the point for us Christians. Well, the story that the Bible continues to tell is that we are all in exile. We're all away from the place that we're supposed to be. Our failure to be who God created us to be means that we die-- literally. Sometimes we live relatively long lives. Other times we die young. Either way it's messed up. We live our lives asking, "Why are there bones?" Why is there death in the living room?

The world acts like the false prophets, trying to declare victory when things are as bad as ever. They try to comfort us with sentiment: "it's the circle of life! Death's not a big deal. It's just part of life." But anyone who has experienced a death near to them knows it's the opposite of nothing. It's messed up. It's wrong. It's not the way things are supposed to be. Jesus *knew* what was going to happen with Lazarus and he is still deeply moved and troubled by the death of his friend. Death is not nothing.

¹ Eze 36:23–28

Rather than pretend like death isn't a problem, the Christian message is that death matters, but it doesn't have the last word. Jesus says "I am the resurrection... the one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live." Yes, you will die. But you will live again. This is different than we usually talk about death-- that when we die we go to heaven. That view is not *wrong*, but it's not the whole story. The Bible talks about a state after death where we are "with Christ" in paradise. The bible talks about this state as sleep. That's why Jesus says that Lazarus has fallen asleep. It's also why Martha tells Jesus, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." As Christians we confess that "we believe in the resurrection of the body." Our ultimate destiny is not to live disembodied spiritual lives in heaven, but for God to resurrect our bodies so that we can live in the new heavens and new earth that Revelation 21 talks about. (By the way, this is why Christians have traditionally not practiced cremation-- as a testimony to the fact that God would one day raise their bodies up. These days, more Christians choose cremation for logistical reasons, but they have the rightly placed confidence that the God who formed humanity out of dust can do so again).

So there is a sense in which we will die, enter a period of rest, and then live again. But there is also a sense in which we will never die. Jesus says "I am the life... everyone who lives and believes in me will never ever die." Get this: when we confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior, when we believe that he is God's Son and put our trust in him for salvation, the Holy Spirit comes into us. Every Christian has the Holy Spirit within them, which is why Paul says in Romans 8:9, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." The Holy Spirit comes and breathes God's breath of eternal life into us. That's why Paul can say "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the

dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

Paul and other early Christians seemed to have a very clear understanding of the Holy Spirit-- I'm thinking we'll do a series on the Holy Spirit after Pentecost, by the way. But Paul didn't have to go to seminary to understand the Holy Spirit, because for him the Spirit was life and peace. Before Paul had the Spirit of God, he was unable to keep God's Instruction, even though he wanted to and strived to with all his being. As he says here, “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot.” But when Paul met the risen Jesus and believed, the Holy Spirit changed him. It brought him out of his exile in sin and unfaithfulness. It brought new life.

Just as living in the promised land required Israel's faithfulness to God's instruction, so also living in the new heaven and new earth requires our faithfulness. If there is a place with no sin or sickness or death, it is because God has barred those things from entering. This is why we heard Jesus a few weeks ago telling Nicodemus that no one could enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit. We need that washing that God will give us. We need the new life that the Spirit puts within us. In other words, before we have a physical resurrection at the end of time, we need a spiritual resurrection now.

So look around you. Are there any dry bones? Are any of them yours? Perhaps it's time for you to do as Ezekiel did. Speak God's Word to those bones and tell them that God is telling them come to life. Then speak to God's Spirit and say “Come from the Four Winds O Breath, and Breathe new life into these bones.” Come O Breath. Breathe.

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