

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.

² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."

⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones:

I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded;

and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:

Thus says the Lord GOD:

Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'

¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD:

I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil;

then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD."

I'm from Southern Ontario. It's humid and sticky there. Before we moved here, I thought I knew wind...I had, after all, seen tumbleweed stampede down the airport runway when I landed for the first time in Saskatchewan...I thought I knew wind. But I didn't.

We are always looking for a non-windy day to burn our pile of tumbleweed – and the day has not nor likely will not ever come. I've given up fixing up my hair on a windy day...I've stopped wearing wrap-around skirts, and whipped dessert outside on a windy day just ends up being crunchy and gritty, not light and fluffy. Bryce tells me it's worse in Tucson because they don't have grass – just gravel.

Friends, we're just getting into that windy season now!

And I'm not just talking about the weather. Yes, with the eventual coming of spring, windows and doors will be left open – flung open to let in a fresh breath of air to blow through the stale places that winter has closed in...stirring up that old dust.

On a deeper level, however, the wind also moves into and through our inner spaces – those places where we feel dry and crusty...if not dead.

Peter Haynes, a retired Church of the Brethren pastor wrote “Lent is a time for becoming aware of the "dead wood" (so to speak), the "dry bones" within us. It's a season for repentance, for turning (that's what "repentance" means: "turning") from the sin that leaves us stagnant and desolate and dusty, and turning towards the One who blows the breath of life into us.

I, for one, am ready for this windy season. We've had our share of death and mourning. Oh, if only Easter would come!

I'm not talking about the bright hymns and the flowers and the Easter eggs, though those are, indeed, a real plus.

I'm talking about the kind of hallelujahs that can only come after Good Friday. After we've seen and witnessed and lived and cried where death is...where Jesus was.

Easter is when God's Spirit comes from the four winds and pushes the stone away, resurrection power bursting out from a tomb and new life sprouting wherever our feet fall.

And I think we're ready for a reminder of that resurrection power that rolls stones from tombs or sends tiny tendrils of grass through the strongest slabs of concrete.

Of course, every Sunday is supposed to be an Easter celebration where we rise from the depths which seek to pull us down and is a part of every new day for those who trust in the One who said, "I am the resurrection and the life..."

Easter is not tied to a particular date on the calendar, nor is it really held hostage by a season of weather changing from cold to slightly less cold. We need to recall that Christians in the southern hemisphere celebrate Easter in the fall, as the leaves begin changing and the weather starts its march from hot to cold. No Easter bunnies there. It's not time, there, for lilies to bloom, but rather for bulbs to be planted in the ground, a promise of what God's tomorrow will bring.

Whether it's Spring or Fall or somewhere in between, the transition from planted bulb to blooming flower, or icy blanket to soft grass, or dry bones to living, breathing hope... each of these is a journey. A journey like that Psalm 130, a song of ascents that was likely sung on pilgrimage as people headed to worship at the festivals in Jerusalem.

The Psalmist begins in the depths, crying out to God. “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered”. And with forgiveness, the Psalmist begins to rise from the depths to hope in the Lord, and so do we.

Because we know that our God comes right into the valley of dry bones with us. Our Jesus walks right up to the tomb with those who mourn, and he weeps. Our God does not sit up in the sky and say, “whenever you’re done with your weeping and moaning down there and ready to slap on a smile, then we can talk”. No, God knows that our dry valleys are real, and that’s where God meets us.

And not only does God meet us there, not only does Jesus stand at the tomb in tears with us, but as our souls wait for the Lord more than those watch for the morning, God is preparing to bring life. Jesus is preparing to show his resurrection power.

Jesus’ words and actions always point beyond themselves, like road signs to a destination further down the path. Peter Haynes continues “Many of those who followed Jesus nearly 2,000 years ago focused more upon the signs and wonders, than they did upon where he was going. The same is true of many Christians today. We confuse the signs with the peak to which they point, the wonders with the wonderful awesome God who once spoke on Mt. Sinai, the miracles with the real miracle worker.”

I haven’t heard the rattling of an army’s worth of bones coming together, or seen the winds come and breathe life into a multitude. I haven’t seen a man walk out of a tomb where he was buried 4 days earlier. But I do try to notice the signposts that point down the wind-of-the-spirit path to resurrection.

How often do we really pay attention to these signposts along our journey with Christ which point to the resurrection? To be honest, I haven’t witnessed anyone who has died coming back to life... Or have I?... Is it a signpost to the resurrection when a church in the middle of nowhere works together with the larger community to make a spectacular celebration of giving – drawing crowds – and giving away all the proceeds made to those in need around the world.

Is it a signpost to the resurrection when a widower steps out by faith and steps into new friendships in the church and in the community following the death of his beloved wife?

Is it a signpost to the resurrection when a young man moves past the errors of his adolescence and young adulthood and, with the aid of his circle of support and accountability, seeks to change his habits and foster new healthy sustainable lifestyle?

Is it a signpost to the resurrection when a newly retired woman finally has time to learn what SHE wants and what SHE needs to be healthy and whole – and jumps in full force.

Is it a signpost to the resurrection when a young woman decides to love herself despite the taunts she hears from her peers?

Is it a signpost of the resurrection when, after a week of negative self-talk and despair at the world “as it is” a child greets you at the door with such joy – you! Even YOU are welcome here! Come! Come in! Oh I could list so many more.

Have I witnessed anyone who has died coming back to life?...

Maybe not in the physical sense, but I must say that if all those circumstances I just mentioned are evidence, then yes, the signposts to the resurrection are all around us here.

And the resurrection signposts keep pointing me to hope, even when I am tempted to keep tripping on those dry valleys. As I reflect on Ezekiel's vision, I associate less with the prophet and more with the bones. Perhaps it's because of that hungering and thirsting for the windy season.

For those who first received these words from Ezekiel, the promise had to do with new life springing from the ashes of a defeated nation. Israel and Judah were no more. Ezekiel had himself prophesied the fall of Jerusalem, and it came to pass. This vision came after the fall of Jerusalem and it was a reminder that all is not as it seems. It was an assurance that what had been destroyed will be rebuilt and an encouragement for those who had lost hope to stand up and start walking toward Zion. This vision was a sign on the road: "Windy season ahead."

We also walk through the valley. In fact, we can well associate with the dry bones just lying on the ground - disconnected, lifeless, a sign of the past not the future.

"Can these bones live?" Well, you heard the dream. From those bones a multitude arises, a people of God. And then the wind blows - the breath of God brings them to life. I like that part. I'm not just as somebody watching from the sidelines. I need that breath myself.

And God says to us, "Your bones are dried up? I will put my spirit within you. Your hope is lost? You shall again live. You are cut off completely? I will place you on your own soil; And THEN you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act" (cf Ez 37:11, 14).

It's written that, after Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb many who had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. We may not have seen resurrection in the physical sense, like Lazarus. But the power of Christ's resurrection is all around us, breathing new life into our dry bones, pointing us to hope, transforming what was broken, and restoring what was lost.

We are a resurrection people, believing in Jesus not only with our minds, but with our souls and our hands and our feet, so that that resurrection power enlivens us, empowers us to live as God calls us.

So that when God says "Prophesy to the winds, Mortal!" we say, "How loud?" And when Jesus says "roll that stone away", we say "Yes, Lord, we believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world".

It's almost become unconscious on my part that when I pray, one of the first things I do is take in a deep breath. Sometimes I think that's the most significant part of the prayer. All the words that follow are an afterthought, a reflection of God's breath bringing these bones to life.

Allow me to finish this message in a rather unconventional way. The windy season is coming. Take a deep breath and breathe in God's resurrection promise! Please stand if you are able, turn to 701 your hymnbook. Get that over and done with. Now, take in some nice long, deep breaths.

It's a healthy thing to do, or so I've been told. Do like you do when the doctor puts that cold stethoscope on your back and asks you to breathe in and out. Become aware of the very gift of God's breath of life. Breathe in, breathe out. In a moment, Sharon will begin playing the hymn of response.