



The New England Church Pulpit

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NEW LIFE IN BROKEN PLACES April 6, 2014

Ezekiel 37.1-6

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 that was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Speak to these bones, saying: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay muscles 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."

John 11.1-27

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha. The sisters sent a message to Jesus, "He whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

When Jesus saw her crying, and her friends who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Come and see." Then Jesus began to weep. When Jesus, greatly disturbed, came to the tomb, he said "Take away the stone." Martha said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." But Jesus looked upward, and thanking God, cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

If you are the kind of person who has it all together; who is secure in the confidence that you have found the purpose of life and know its ultimate fulfillment, then these scripture texts are not going to have much to say to you. But for the rest of us who sometimes, perhaps often, feel exiled from that connection to things meaningful and at times feel exiled from God, then this text is a consoling balm for aching spirits.

The parallel stories of the prophet Ezekiel standing before a field of dry bones and that of Lazarus being trapped in a tomb speak to us of the desperate situation in which we often find ourselves when life comes crushing down on us. The setting in Ezekiel is Israel's exile. After the years of a God-given monarchy, the nation of Judah had fallen to the conquering armies of Babylonia. The wealthy and powerful people of Judah, including a number of the priests, had been forced into exile into Babylonia, where they served the conquerors as governmental functionaries or as agricultural laborers. Ezekiel was one of these exiles. The experience of exile was crushing for these people of God. They had lost a large part of their identity at the same time that they lost everything familiar to them. The prophet Ezekiel struggles with God's existence, whether God even cared, and if so, how was that to be known. Was it possible for people so defeated to have hope?

The family and friends of Lazarus struggled with God's absence in light of their sorrow, amid the grief of losing a dear friend. And even Jesus, though John tells us he knew how this would all turn out, was so grief-stricken, his spirit so greatly disturbed that he cried his eyes out for the loss of his good friend, a man whom he loved very much.

But in both cases, God's spirit instills new life. In the valley of broken, dried, forsaken bones God raises up new life, putting bones together, restoring muscle and skin. In John's story, God restores Lazarus to mortal life. It is not life eternal; it is life, with all of its attending sorrows and griefs and impending death. Ezekiel and Jesus are agents of something larger than themselves, something even they don't completely understand, but are willing to convey the life-giving energy of a living God to offer hope amid despair.

In both stories, it is the speaking that awakens the dead, for words of hope are powerful indeed. Words are more than platitudes when they arouse within us the spirit of God with which each of us is imbued. The same Hebrew word is used to mean "spirit," "wind," and "breath," all of which are agents of life and hope.

How often have we been aroused amid the devastating events of life by a word of encouragement, maybe even a word that actually saved us from giving up? Those who spoke it, or wrote it on a card, or shared a meaningful poem or scripture, perhaps had no idea how important it would become to us.

Perhaps the word was an activity, done without words at all, offered to us at a time when we most needed to know someone cared. And in so doing, our spirit was restored.

A young woman, now in her adult years, told of a day when in high school the world came crashing in on her. Everything about her life had fallen apart, as dry and lifeless as the bones Ezekiel talks about. Desperate and hopeless, she cleaned out her locker at school one day, vowing not to return. On her way home, the burden of all her books became too much and tumbled out on the ground. A fellow student happened to see it and helped her pick them up and carried them to her house. She said later that she had intended to take her own life that day deciding it would be less painful in the grave than on this side of life. But the single act of that one student, whom she did not know, saved her. In some unexplainable way, unknown to both the girl and the peer who helped her, that one act of kindness sparked the spirit of new life within her, a breath of hope to live, a word of care and love, and she was called from the grave, as it were, and given a new chance at living with purpose.

Most of us, if we're honest with ourselves, have been through dry patches at some time in life; periods of days or perhaps years when we felt distant not only from God but from anything purposeful. At those times we feel disconnected, at sea, drifting about with little sense of direction and even less sense of how to find our way. Sometimes it's just that we're too busy, albeit doing good things, but too busy to catch a breath, to enjoy life, trapped in a frenetic pace that just doesn't stop. It is stories like these of Ezekiel and Lazarus that remind us that what we feel may not necessarily be the way things really are; that our perspective may not be the only perspective. Hope is a powerful, life-giving antidote to the death-dealing factors that rob us of integrity and meaning.

Lent becomes the paradigm for those times when all seems lost. During Lent we focus on the dark side of life, the things that beset us; the wrongs that we do that we know we shouldn't do but we do anyway; death and fatalistic mindsets that consume us. But within Lent, Sundays are little Easters. They don't count in the 40 days of Lent, reminding us that within the shadows of tombs there is an intermittent light that provides moments of sunshine, rays of hope.

Like Israel, we may feel alone and lost, exiled from the mainstream of life, floundering in the wilderness, afraid of the changes that require of us faith, haunted by the past, boxed in by society's prejudices, disappointed with others' behavior, betrayed by those we trusted. Like Lazarus and his sisters and even Jesus, we feel at times bound by the forces of life that take life rather than give it. But God says "Nevertheless, come out of your tomb, be free of all that binds you, find new life among those who were also once scattered bones but who welcome you with open arms, and others who have traveled on similar journeys and who will shed some light on yours and walk with you when the pathway seems obscure.

Around this table of bread and wine we are nourished in hope. There are no money-back guarantees; there are no privileges of entitlement for the faithful. But by eating and drinking together in the presence of the one who breathes new life into us, we are refreshed in hope for new life in dry places.

Poet W. H. Auden's verse entitled "In Sickness and in Health" captures the essence of the divine spark, the word of God's "nevertheless" amid the daily bump and grind:

*Beloved, we are always in the wrong.
Handling so clumsily our stupid lives,
Suffering too little or too long
Too careful even in our selfish loves;
The decorative manias we obey
Die in grimaces round us every day,
Yet through the clamor comes a voice
Which utters an absurd command—Rejoice!*

Amen.

--Gary L. McCann