

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year A, April 2, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“New Life for Dry Bones”
Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

our story from Ezekiel today, about the valley of the dry bones, might bring to mind to you the song, *Dem Bones*: “Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones (3X), Now hear the word of the Lord;” or maybe you prefer the part of it that goes, “Hip bone connected to the back bone, Back bone connected to the shoulder bone, Shoulder bone connected to the neck bone, Neck bone connected to the head bone;” while this may sound like a traditional African-American spiritual, it was only written in the 1920s, by the prolific composer, author, poet, diplomat, and early Civil Rights advocate James Weldon Johnson
[you can listen to it here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYb8Wm6-QfA>]

there’s nothing old-fashioned about the message that this song and the Bible passage behind it conveys; it’s the same message that is found in John’s gospel account of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead; but it is important to note that neither of these are resurrection stories, but resuscitation stories -- there is a big difference between the two

resurrection is not a return from the dead to the same kind of life one had before; Jesus, after his resurrection, was no longer the flesh and blood person his disciples had know; they didn’t even recognize him by sight; resurrection is the passage and change into a new kind of life, no longer here on earth, but in the very presence of God and of Christ

what Ezekiel is prophesying to the house of Israel is a return from the dead back into this life on earth; and what Jesus does for Lazarus, likewise, is to return him to his sisters and friends as a living, breathing human once again; notice how in Jesus’ discussion with Martha they do talk about the “resurrection on the last day;” that is something she and Lazarus, and us, will experience some day; but Jesus tells her he’s about to do something right then for her brother -- that is resuscitation

and just as an aside, to anyone who wishes to contrast the Marthas and the Marys of this world, the practical-minded workers as differentiated from the spiritual-minded devotees; that distinction only holds true in the one story from Luke ch.

10; look closely at this story from John's gospel today and you'll see that here Martha demonstrates a deeper theological understanding of who Jesus is and what he is capable of than do his other disciples -- much like we saw in the Samaritan woman at the well two weeks ago; here in John's account she is far, far more than a distracted housekeeper

while each of us lives, as Christians, with the promise of a future day resurrection, we also live with the present day promise of resuscitation; but I don't mean in the way that Lazarus experienced it; rather, we live every day with the promise of resuscitation as Ezekiel frames it -- as a symbolic coming back to life for people who thought they were as good as dead, who thought they had no life ahead of them, and who had given up on any hope that God might restore them as a people and as a nation; Ezekiel was prophesying to them after they had been carried off into exile in Babylon, after the destruction of Jerusalem; he's holding out hope to a people who are not dead, but who are acting like they are dead; he's assuring them that if they hold onto God and keep the faith, they will have a future ahead of them, back in the Promised Land

perhaps you may have had a time in your life when you did not feel fully alive, or when circumstances seemed so bleak that you could not imagine anything good in your future; or when you felt cut off from God, cut off from others, cut off even from yourself; a time without any hope -- when you felt like you were no more than dry, lifeless bones

the promise that God had Ezekiel convey to his people is the same promise that still stands for us, God's people, today; God says, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live;" now remember that God has already carried out that part of the promise, by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit in our Baptisms; but as with any gift we've received, it doesn't do us any good if we don't use it; we can choose to ignore even a valuable gift, to put it in the back of the closet, forget about it, fail to use the gift we have been given; God doesn't do everything for us, we have to meet God half-way and do our part in making use of God's gifts

so if we don't feel alive, we need to call upon that Holy Spirit within us; with sincere prayer and desire -- what did we pray in the Collect of the Day?: Grant us "to desire what you promise;" and with heartfelt desire to pray until we can connect with that latent power of the Holy Spirit within us and invite it to come fully alive, to make us fully alive, with the fullness of an inspired life; that word 'inspired' means to be filled with life, filled with breath, filled with spirit -- the

way the dry bones were filled with life, with breath, with spirit -- and with hope; that same promise still hold true for us today; Breathe on us, Breath of God; fill us with life anew (adapted from Hymn 508)