

“NEW LIFE FROM DUST, DIRT AND DRY BONES”

Sermon by Rev. Patty Farr
Based on Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:38-44

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Ann Jaqua was traveling on a Trailways bus heading toward Washington DC thinking about the problems she'd been having recently with her three teenage daughters. Her girls had been making some reckless, even dangerous choices lately. Like any good mother, Ann would do anything to protect her children from harm, but she was realizing at the same time that her girls were growing up. Ann's maternal instinct to protect and guard her daughters was running smack into the wall of her daughters' own strong adolescent need to make decisions for themselves, even at the risk of making some bad mistakes. As Ann sped along the highway looking out the window of the bus, she was feeling something we all feel at times – hopeless. (*This and later stories and quotes are from Nora Gallagher's book, Things Seen and Unseen*).

Is there an area of *your* life which has seemed a little hopeless lately? Maybe you've been struggling with a troubled relationship – with your spouse, your child, your friend. Or you may be battling an illness or coping with the loss of a loved one – making you feel overwhelmed, lonely and grief-stricken. Hopeless feelings can come from a stinging failure or disappointment. Many of you sitting here in church this morning have been struggling to navigate your way through some private hell, trying your best to handle a problem that seems a bit beyond you, leaving you feeling quietly hopeless.

In this, you are not alone. To be human means to experience not just moments but sometimes whole seasons of hopelessness as we journey through life. Stories abound in the Bible of people who faced bouts of hopelessness, and of God who faced these times with them, somehow always bringing hope out of the most hopeless situation. One such story comes from the prophet Ezekiel. He describes a haunting vision which, once heard, can never be forgotten. “The hand of the Lord came upon me,” he writes, “and he brought me out by the spirit...and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones...He led me around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.”

As I listen to Ezekiel's description, I find myself recalling a childhood memory of running through the cemetery at the end of our street with my friend Debbie when we were about six years old. We would dare each other to peek through the tiny slit in the chain-locked doorway that led into a spooky mausoleum where several huge stone drawers held the bodies of the dead. That building like no other brought to my childish imagination the smell, the look, the feel of death. Almost no light made its way into that dank, stale-smelling space. A lone window opposite the door was covered in so much grime that only a hazy cloud of light filtered through the glass. A vase of dried up flowers, covered in dust and crumbling with age, sat day after day, month after month, on a stone slab between the drawers holding the bodies. As I peeked through the crack in the door, I could tell that almost no one ever came in there to fix up that room, to tend to the flowers, to pray for the dead, to let in some air and light. This dusty, dirty, dark room haunted me like no other, and remains with me still as a desolate image of loss and hopelessness.

But God has something else in mind than for a six-year-old to remain haunted by the image of death. God has something else in mind than for an exiled people cut off from their homeland to conclude that they are hopelessly dead. So God asks Ezekiel a question, "Do you think that these bones can live?" Ezekiel doesn't know how to answer that one, for those bones in his vision look awfully dead to him, so he says diplomatically, "O Lord God, only you know."

"Prophesy to these bones," God commands Ezekiel, "and say to them, 'O dry bones...I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and...you shall know that I am the Lord.'" Ezekiel prophesies as God commanded him, and the *breath* - the exact same word in Hebrew as the *spirit* - comes into them, and they live, and stand on their feet, full-bodied, buoyant, brimming with life, a vast multitude dancing in the valley. In historical terms, the people of Judah were eventually able to return to their homeland, rebuild their temple, and start their life anew.

Let's move to one more scene in the Bible – this one taking place six centuries after Ezekiel, in the village of Bethany where a certain man named Lazarus lies dying. Lazarus and his two sisters Mary and Martha have been close friends and students of Jesus for a long time. They call him "the Teacher" and they have often sat at his feet listening to his stories and his teachings. The love they have for Jesus knows no bounds.

Having sent word to Jesus that Lazarus is near death, Mary and Martha are certain that Jesus will arrive in the nick of time to heal their beloved brother. It is precisely at this point that they experience a crisis of faith. Jesus doesn't show. *Jesus doesn't show!* And their brother dies. Overwhelmed with grief at the death of their brother, Martha and Mary are also completely baffled and even feel betrayed by the deliberate absence of Jesus. Why hasn't he arrived in their moment of need?

Christ has a way of arriving on the scene just *after* what we think is “the nick of time”, just *after* we’ve given up looking for Him. And contrary to what we think when all our urgent prayers seem unanswered, his timing in our lives is absolutely perfect. God operates with what one of my seminary professors liked to call “divine economy.” Everything God does affects not just one person or thing, but the entire universe. Every action God takes carefully re-weaves the vast cosmic web in such a subtle and almost imperceptible way that we can miss the quiet healing and transforming of lives that is going on all around us, in just the right order at just the right pace. Jesus, the perfect channel of God’s will, knew exactly when the right time was to bring new life to Lazarus: not “in the nick of time” when his sisters requested, but later, when it seemed to everyone else to be too late.

Jesus arrived late so that he could perform a miracle. He would raise Lazarus from death to life. Jesus wanted this miracle to touch not just Lazarus and his sisters, but also the many other mourners who stood there that day and who, up to this point, had not found any reason to have hope in God. Verse 45, which comes just after Lazarus rises up out of the tomb, gives us evidence of the perfection of Jesus’ timing. The verse says this: “Many of the [people]...who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, *believed in him.*”

Through his compassionate act of raising Lazarus back to life, Jesus was conveying a message not just to Lazarus or Mary or Martha, but to everyone, “When you are struggling and in pain and at a loss, I am with you; I can help. Wherever in the world people and nations are desperately lost in conflict, war and despair, I am there. When you feel hopeless, I will give hope back to you.”

Writer Nora Gallagher speaks about finding this hope after she thought she had lost it forever. “When I returned to church, I did not know why... In the beginning, I would go to church and cry. I spent a year crying in church...I refused to pledge, to promise a monthly sum to the church. I made myself as invisible as possible in the church...Very often, I didn’t know what I was doing there. Many layers of feeling, experience, and habit had to come together before I understood religious faith, including my own. I felt at first as if I were learning a new language or how to dance: I was so awkward and foolish that at every turn I wanted to quit. Why did I cry so much? Apparently, many people who return to church or discover it later in their lives end up crying in the pews... In religious terms, [I think I cried because] I was lost and on the verge of being found.”

That, it turns out, is the meaning of the resurrection. Jesus had said as much to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” And then Jesus added one more thing. He said, “Do you believe this?” That is the question Jesus poses to us this morning. Do YOU believe this? In your own deepest, darkest valley of dry bones, where you have lost your hope, do you believe that God is here to resurrect you? You

may think it is much too late. Like Martha and Mary you may be tempted to think God's timing stinks. "Lord, if you had been here..." That is what both Mary and Martha cried, and that is what we secretly cry as well. "Lord, if you had only been here, I wouldn't have messed up my marriage or made that mistake at my job. I wouldn't have lost control of my troubled teenager, I wouldn't be struggling with this illness, I wouldn't have all this difficulty paying my bills, I wouldn't be grieving the death of my loved one, I wouldn't be challenged by this drinking problem or this awful loneliness. Lord, if you had only been here, our world wouldn't be so cruel, with its prejudice and torture and terrorism, bombings and genocide, famine and AIDS. Lord, if you had only been here...."

If we travel long enough on this path with God, the truth will dawn on each of us. All the while we've been anxiously wondering when God is going to show up, we finally realize one day that God actually has been here with us the whole time. God has never gone away; it is we who have gone blind to God's gentle presence in our midst. The truth is what Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Ann Jaqua discovered this truth looking up from the book she was reading on the Trailways bus. She suddenly realized she believed in the resurrection. 'I was saying the [Apostles'] Creed...from the prayer book open on my lap and looking out the window at the telephone poles and trees zipping by. When I came to the words, 'I believe in the resurrection,' I don't know what happened, but my guard went down, I guess. I really believed it completely for an instant. I mean I knew without a doubt that it was true...It was just enough to allow me to let go of my terrible fear, to see the goodness in my children and to believe in their potential for good. The resurrection means that nothing is hopeless anymore."

Nothing is hopeless anymore. Our God is the God of Hope. When we dare to put our lives in God's hands, everything, every loss, every disappointment, every sorrow carries the seed of resurrection in it. With Ezekiel and the people of Israel, with Martha and Mary and Lazarus, with Ann Jaqua and Nora Gallagher, with people of every faith all around the world, we are learning that with God, every death is turned to new life; every dry bone will rise up and dance.

Let's pray. God, you are the God of hope. You know how to make dry bones live. Bring all that is withered and dried up within us back to life, in your own good time, so we may learn to dance with you. Thank you for new life. AMEN.

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