

Can these Bones Live?

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH Larry Moffet, Senior Pastor APRIL 29, 2012



Blue type is a quotation from Ezekiel 37:1-14 or I John 3: 16-20

Red type is a reference to the Gospel, John 10:10-17

It was a restless night. I wasn't sure if I was sleeping or still awake. And then something happened. To this day I don't know if it was a dream or...

I heard a voice. It wasn't a real voice. Let's call it a still small voice. These words came to me: "Get up!" I'll be honest. I whined. "It's been a rough week. Even if I can't sleep I need to rest." The Presence said, "Trust me. You want to see this." And I said, "All I want to see is my pillow." But I went.

So I found myself overlooking a little valley. It wasn't quite like this room but it reminded me of this room. It wasn't quite like Lincoln, but it felt a little like Lincoln. And the Spirit asked, "What do you see?" I rubbed my eyes, and said, "It's dusty and I'm so sleepy I can't see anything." "Look harder." "I see bones." Mortal one, "**Can these bones live?**" "**God only you know that. You tell me.**"

"**Walk through the bones,**" said the Presence. "Oh no, I'd rather not," I said. "Go ahead. They can't hurt you. You might learn something." So I walked. Slowly.

There were all kinds of piles of bones. Piles and piles of bones. There were the bones of **loneliness**. Bones of **apathy**. Bones of **injustice**. Every pile of bones had a little sign. The bones of **gossip** had a sign that said "If you can't say anything nice about anybody, come sit by me!"

The wind whispered through the bones and made a noise like a little sad song:

"We are glad to be scattered. We did so little good to each other."

The bones were very dry. "Keep going," said the Presence. "Touch the bones." "You are asking too much now," I said. "Go ahead," said the Presence, the Guide. "Just reach out."

So I touched the bones, the bones of **anger**. The bones of **blaming others** for our own unhappiness. The bones of **consumerism**, with a sign saying "What have you done for me lately?"

There were **Republican** Bones and **Democratic** bones, and both were dead. **Rich** bones, **middle-income** bones, and **poor** bones. There were piles of the bones of **self-absorption**. That pile had bones from **all generations** from the oldest to the youngest. Their sign said "It's all about me."

Bones of **arrogance**. Bones of **exclusion**. Bones of **entitlement**. Bones of **jealousy**. Bones of **lust**. Bones of **hunger**. There were piles of bones for everything that is wrong in us and around us. You know the names of the piles of bones. Go ahead, name some of the piles of bones Ezekiel saw: **racism, sexism, classism,**

homophobia, self-centeredness, loss, hopelessness, passive-aggressiveness, sad bones, some of which had a sign that said “See how sad we are: that proves how spiritually deep we are.” They were dead too.

And the Guide, the Presence said, “**Ezekiel, Preach to these bones.**” And Larry Ezekiel said, “Oh don’t make me do that. It’s hard enough to preach to the Sunday morning crowd. What would I preach to dry bones?”

“Just preach. Preach what you know.” I preached. I preached all three of my sermons. (Well you know all pastors have only two or three sermons, really. In fact you are just plain lucky if your pastor has 3 sermons!)

The bones were still dead. So I kept on preaching. **I preached about the all-inclusive Love that will not let us go; how nothing can separate us from God.** (Sermon #1.) And the bones smiled and said, “that’s nice, but we are glad to be scattered. We can focus on ourselves this way.” In the words of the poet T.S. Eliot:

*Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining
We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other*

I kept on preaching about the need to reach out. (Sermon #2), I the joy of moving beyond ourselves. I preached “You can do better (#3).” I didn’t know what else to do. So I preached sermon #1 again. All of a sudden, I heard **a rattling noise**. It got louder and louder. Stomp your feet. Make some noise! Tap the pew! Shake your head! I looked. Slowly at first, **bone connected with bone**. You know the song:

*The foot bone connected to the ankle bone,
The ankle bone connected to the leg bone,
The leg bone connected to the knee bone,
The knee bone connected to the thigh bone,
The thigh bone connected to the hip bone,
The hip bone connected to the back bone,
The back bone connected to the neck bone,
The neck bone connected to the head bone...*

Then muscles covered the bones, and skin covered the muscles. And I turned to the Presence, the Guide, and I said... “**I can preach!**” The Presence said, “Not so fast, Ezekiel. **Look at them. They are still dead.**”

“What do I do now?” I asked. The Presence said, “**Start preaching to the wind – to the breath – to the Spirit.** Call on the breath that entered the first human being in creation, the Spirit that makes life happen.”

So I preached to the wind. I called on the Breath of God. I preached and I preached to the Spirit. “Come, Holy Ghost! Come, Breath of God!” The winds howled. It was like a Nebraska thunderstorm *plus* a winter blizzard. The winds and the breath swirled all around the valley of the bones. Breath–Wind went into the bodies, just like God breathed life into the first human beings, according to Genesis. The bodies started breathing. They started smiling. **When they realized they were alive, they stood up.** I said, “They stood up.” One more time, let me say it: “they stood up!” And the Presence, the Guide said, “**These are my people.**”

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What does all this mean? What did Ezekiel’s mean to slaves in Babylon? What does it mean to us? **Can** these bones live? The answer is “YES!”

Ezekiel’s exiles. His people lived in the Land of Babylon. We live in the Land of Distraction. The Word of the Lord to them and to us is wonderful:

- 1). It is God, the Spirit, who brings new life.**
- 2). New life happens right here and right now. Always and Forever.**
- 3). The new life God gives us moves us beyond ourselves, if we let it.**

The most visible expression of God’s new life is **community**. When we build community, when we focus on others’ needs, we have new life. The resurrection happens in us. Bone comes together with bone. Little bits of you and little bits of me, if we let them get connected, are the building blocks of new life.

That is why building community is a Sacramental Act.

**Building Community is a Sacrament (an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace).
Building Community is as life-giving as Baptism and as redemptive as Communion.**

Every seemingly small act that builds community: every sandwich we make for the hungry boys here for the Monday night's Tutoring program, every improvement to all of our neighborhoods, every act of caring for someone who is sick or left out, every time we do something that makes opportunities fair for all people, every smile, every encouraging word, every new friendship, every act of ours that bridges the generations--it is all God's life in us.

**By building community we become Servant Leaders, followers of Jesus Christ,
The One who comes so that all will have abundant life, who is our Guide, our Shepherd
our real Presence, who helps us build each other up and heals our own souls in the process.**

Bone connecting with bone. Building community. Linking up with others: this is what moves us beyond the places we ourselves are emotionally stuck. It makes us "**partakers of the Divine Nature.**" *II Peter 1:4*

Bishop N.T. Wright puts it this way: "Please note that the resurrection stories in the Gospels do not say Jesus is raised, therefore we're going to heaven or therefore we're going to be raised. They say Jesus is raised, therefore, God's new creation has begun and we've got a job to do."

John Crossan who often disagrees with Wright, also says that the resurrection means: "God's Great Clean-Up of a world grown old in evil and impurity, injustice and violence has already begun ... and we are called to participate in it. The end of the world is not what we are talking about. We're talking about cosmic transformation of this world." To which I say, "that is building community, my dear friends."

Building Community truly is a Sacrament.

Building Community is an outward and physical act that carries an inward and spiritual grace.

Building Community engages us in physical things and spiritual things
that point to ways God is involved with us by constantly bringing new life.

**When good things happen around you,
in you,
because of you
and even in spite of you,
you are part of God's new life
that is always bringing resurrection
to every part of Creation.
Now and Always.
Here and Everywhere.**

OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE - 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.

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, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: 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 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."

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. 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.

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.”

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

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.’ 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 [the living].”

EPISTLE Scripture - 1 John 3:16-20

We know love by this:

that Christ laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

¹⁷How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before God whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and God knows everything.

THE GOSPEL John 10:10-16

I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.

¹¹“I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ...

¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must go to them also, and they will listen to my voice, so there will be one flock, one shepherd.

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

An Open-Spirited Community of Faith and Action

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Please worship with us Sundays at 8:30 and 10:45 a.m.