

Ezekiel 37:1-14 Galilee 3/9/08

When Rosser and I lived in Germany we toured Dachau, one of the Nazi death camps during World War II. In the museum were disturbing photographs of **open pits** filled with bones of Jewish men and women who were **murdered** and then **buried** in mass graves. If you have toured the Holocaust Museum in Washington you have seen similar photographs. I'm reminded of the mass graves filled with all **those innocent bones** when I hear God's question to Ezekiel in today's text? "*Can these bones live?*" Those bones do live. Those bones are **brought to life** for me by a Holocaust survivor, Rabbi Laslo Berkowitz, the founding Rabbi of Temple Rodef Shalom in McLean, Virginia. Rabbi Berkowitz shared his story with a clergy group I was part of. Through the **rabbi's eyes** we were able to see those bones – human bones with flesh on them – **real people, not unlike ourselves**, who had once **worked long hours**, they had **studied** in Hebrew School, **baked bread** for Sabbath, and **worshipped God** in synagogues steeped in history and tradition.

*"Can these bones live"*, God asks Ezekiel.

Dry bones live when a **survivor of the Holocaust** shares his story.

Dry bones live when a **mother**, stripped to the bone with **grief** over her dead son, is able to later **publish a book** of his poems, bringing **hope** and **new life** to herself and to many others.

Dry bones live whenever we can **hear** the call of God wooing us away from **hopelessness** and **despair** and **into the divine place** where life begins again.

*"Can these bones live?"*

In our Old Testament lesson, hope had been all but extinguished among the people of Israel in 600 BC. They had **lost** their **land** and the people were

**dying in exile**, many asking if the history of God with his people had come to an end. And was there any reason for hope?

And then the Prophet Ezekiel was granted a vision of what God would do some day. Ezekiel saw a **vision from God** of a valley filled with **dry, bleached bones**. We guess it was a **battlefield** where **fallen warriors** of the defeated had **never** been buried. The bones, a symbol of the nation dead in sin. God **asks the prophet** if the bones can be made to live again. Ezekiel replies that only God can answer that question. Then God invites Ezekiel to **participate** in the vision rather than simply standing by observing it. He is to prophesy to the bones and command them to **reassemble** themselves and clothe themselves with flesh.

When ~~he~~ he does **what God commands**, the bones begin to arrange themselves in their proper order with a noise that shook. An **earthquake** was felt and the **bones were brought together** in human form. Ezekiel is then ordered to prophesy – to call upon the wind, the breath of God – the Spirit to enter the bones and bring them back to life. The breath of God was breathed into these soldiers, and they stood up as a very great army.

We hear in this story a promise meant to bring **joy and hope** back into lives long ago.

Ezekiel's message is very simple: The city of Jerusalem and the people of Judah were being punished because of their sins, both religious and social. Not only was the current generation sinful and deserved punishment but the entire history of Israel had been a history of **disobedience** and **rebellion** against God. They are like dead bones because they are discouraged and without hope.

The Lord commands Ezekiel to preach the Word to these dead bones, to these completely demoralized and dispirited people. The prophet's vision

and his message of **hope** to them was that God **could** and **would** breathe new life into the nation of Israel and it would rise again. *“O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord... I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.”* Ezekiel’s vision is a promise of life, not of a general resurrection, but of the revival of the people beyond the exile. His vision of the valley of dry bones is a prophecy that the people of Israel, dead in exile, will live again on their land. Life will come to the people through the act of God. This divine action does not ask for moral or religious qualifications. It is only from a new creation that Israel can expect the life out of death. This new creation will give a new spirit, which is God’s own Spirit. Through this **resurrection into life** they would know that the Lord is God, the One who spoke the words of prophecy and the One who would act.

We might ask if this passage is relevant to our lives today. We don’t have to experience **life in exile** or **hardships** as the people of Israel. But we can ask ourselves the following: What are some of the dry bones in our **personal lives** that need to be **restored to new life**. What are some of the dry bones in our **families** and our **communities**, or what are some of the dry bones in our **church** that need to be restored to new life? /

In just two weeks we will come together for the great celebration of Easter. As we prepare our hearts and minds for Easter may we be reminded that God’s **love moves among our dry bones**, our sin, and our deaths to bring new life. The spirit of the Lord **restores our spirit and breath**, and we, like the Israelites, can rise from death to new life in Christ.

*Can these bones live? Yes. Yes. Thanks be to God. Amen*