

April 2, 2017
5th Sunday in Lent
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

RIDICULOUS RESURRECTION

Ezekiel 37:1-14 The hand of the LORD came upon me, We know from earlier passages that when the hand of the Lord comes upon Ezekiel, he is going to experience a vision 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. So, Ezekiel is describing his spiritual vision—a direct encounter with the Lord. The people listening to him would have understood he wasn't saying that he had been physically in this valley full of bones, but they would have been familiar with the scene he describes. In ancient times, it was common for the victor in a fierce battle to order that all the bodies of the defeated be left where they had fallen to waste away in the sun and the elements. Ezekiel continues: ³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." There is some ambiguity in Ezekiel's response. According to the NIV, he said "you alone know." Which is probably what he meant. But still.

You see, this vision occurs near the end of the Book of Ezekiel. He is tired. Probably feeling defeated. Like a failure even. He's spent his whole life obeying God's commands and responding to God's call. And he feels like he doesn't have much to show for it. Nothing's changed. Disregard for justice and the Law, greed, envy, sloth, all the old wicked ways continue. So maybe he is thinking: God, you know the answer to your own question and you sure know I don't. In fact, maybe ole Zeke is thinking, Lord, I am tired. I've been trying to make the people understand your ways and they don't listen. Over and over I tell them to obey your commandments but they just turn from you. I really don't need you asking me a

ridiculous question like this. But he could also be thinking “well the Lord wouldn’t ask me a ridiculous question like this if he didn’t have something other than the obvious in mind.” He continues describing the vision to the people:

⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Makes you want to sing doesn't it? ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

So, Ezekiel is telling the people that God told him to tell the bones that God would breathe into the bones and they would live again. In the ancient Hebrew texts, the word used here for breath is the same word used to refer to God’s Spirit. It’s harkening back to Genesis when the earth was a formless void and creation commenced when God’s Spirit, that is, God’s breath moved over the waters. God is talking about breathing the Spirit of God into the bones.

Ezekiel continues with God’s words to the bones. This is God talking to the bones now: ⁶ 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." ⁷ Then we go back to Ezekiel speaking in the first person: 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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." God is telling Ezekiel to call God’s own Spirit to be breathed into the old dry bones. And...

¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹ Then he said to me, Now God is going to explain what the vision means. "Mortal, these bones are the whole

house of Israel. They, the people of Israel, say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹² 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. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD." The word of God for the people of God.

Ezekiel is a prophet, preaching to the exiles in Babylon. They have been without king or country for so long, they believe that as a people, even as the chosen people of God, they are metaphorically dead. They believe God has abandoned them to a metaphorical grave.

And they believe that they are beyond all hope. Life as they knew it is over and it is never coming back. They know nothing about the possibility of resurrection in an age to come, much less about the possibility of rising to newness in life in the here and now. When God told Ezekiel to prophesy to a valley full of dry bones, Ezekiel would have thought that is truly ridiculous. But he did what God commanded and what happens but a brand new creation. Out of the dust of the earth, God raises new life. The old life is gone, a new life has begun. And God says that is what will happen to the people. By God's Spirit, resurrection will happen now, in this life.

We could learn a lot from Ezekiel. We could learn that when we feel disappointed, let down, doubtful and cynical, God is still busy sending the Spirit. We could learn that maybe sometimes ridiculous is OK and not worry so much whether our faith is really as strong as it should be. Not worry so much about whether we are making a difference in the world. Not worry so much about

whether we are making disciples, growing our church. Like Ezekiel, we could focus on the Word of God spoken to us and just proclaim it, obediently with our words and with our actions, without wondering if God is asking something ridiculous.

We could honestly say, “O Lord God, you know and I don’t” and allow that rock bottom truth to propel us to live our lives loving mercy and doing justice, walking humbly with him rather than festering in despondency or, worse, wallowing in self-righteous indignation.

God has the ability to bring life from death, to create whole, breathing bodies out of shattered bones. God has the ability to create faith in the doubtful, hope in the hopeless. And God’s creating activity doesn’t depend upon our confidence in ourselves, or our abilities.

Mary and Martha both lament that if Jesus had been present, then their brother would not have died; neither imagine Jesus can be of help now, after Lazarus is literally dead and buried in the grave. They have some understanding of a resurrection on the final day, but know nothing of present day resurrection. They are not so different from Ezekiel who can’t envision bone coming together with bone and sinew and flesh and breath until the valley of the shadow of death has been transformed to the valley of the spirit-filled living.

There will be times, there have been times for most of us, when we are as defeated and as disillusioned as Mary, Martha and Ezekiel; when we will be as disturbed and heartbroken as Jesus in the face his beloved friend’s death. And even then, we can do God’s bidding. Our role is to follow, however haltingly and hopelessly and yes even skeptically, God’s directions as ridiculous it might seem in the present world. Because, as ridiculous as it may seem, resurrection is for this age as well as the next.