

**The Fear of Death and the Lure of False Resurrection**  
Sermon 55 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 29, 2020  
Lent 5  
Ezekiel 37: 1-14

There's been a lot of chatter about resurrection this week. And it's coming from all sorts of unlikely places. Normally, resurrection is a word relegated to religious circles, mostly around Easter time, when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. Liturgically, it's a little early still, to voice this proclamation as Christians around the world are still deep in the throes of Lent. It isn't Easter, yet.

It isn't Easter, yet. We are not finished with the season of Lent. Or perhaps I should say that the season of Lent isn't finished with us yet. It is week five of our exploration of fear and faith. And it is week three of our experiment with physical distancing and isolation. There's a popular meme going around on social media right now that says: "Honestly hadn't planned on giving up quite this much for Lent." I think we can all identify with that statement. We might have intentionally given up cable news or alcohol. We might have taken on a renewed commitment to daily prayer and meditation. But I'm willing to bet that none of us imagined giving up trips to the hair salon, socializing with folks outside of our immediate families, or gathering in our sanctuary for worship - surrounded by the community of faith that is the body of Christ. It is fair to say, this season of Lent is unlike any other.

It is no wonder we are tempted to rush to resurrection. Fear is exhausting. Distance from our friends and extended family is unsettling and uncomfortable. The constant influx of news is disturbing; and the unending sense that things are only going to get worse has our bodies on alert 24/7. There is no rest in this Lenten wilderness. It is no wonder we want to get ourselves out of these kinds of situations as quickly as possible. It is no wonder we want to know when it will end, to find the light at the end of the tunnel. It's no wonder we want to skip over whatever happens next in order to rush on to resurrection.

But here on the fifth Sunday of Lent... we have to recognize, it isn't Easter, yet.

The church calendar will have us wait two more weeks before we get to the end of this spiritual journey of wilderness. And it looks like it's going to be longer before we reach the end of our other wilderness called COVID-19.

This week the lectionary provides a hauntingly appropriate text for our first Sunday of the Wake County Stay at home order. The scripture from the prophet Ezekiel is one written from the wilderness of Babylonian exile, after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The people have watched as their kin folk died, as they were forced from their homes, and as their house of worship was destroyed. No longer could they worship in their sanctuary.

The whole book of Ezekiel points toward the prophet's vision that the people will once again be together, on their land, and worshipping in a new Temple. Today's verses are filled with imagery made for Hollywood and reminiscent of Charles Dickens' *Christmas*

*Carol* as Ezekiel, the main character is seized by the Spirit of the Lord and set down in the middle of a valley full of bones.

The bones were many – enough to fill the whole valley. And as the prophet gazed upon them he could see that they had been there a while, they were very dry. Like Ebenezer Scrooge gazing upon scenes from his past, present, and future, the prophet must gaze upon these bones and muster a response when the Lord asks him, “Can these bones live?”

He knows better than to express any confidence or despair and so he responds in faith saying: “Lord, only you know.”

Then the prophet is called by God to speak over the bones, a word of hope for a future, even in the valley of death. “Tell them,” says the Lord, that I will lay sinews upon them, and wrap them in flesh... I will cause breath to enter them and they shall live.”

Ezekiel follows the divine instructions and faithfully begins to speak those life-giving words, even in the valley of death.

Sure enough there is a noise, the bones are rattling as they come back together. Soon, those dead, dry bones are connected with sinews and flesh.

But even as those old bones come back together, there is no life... there is no breath in them. Once the prophet began to speak, the bones did what they knew to do, they began to snap back into old rhythms of connection, it felt like resurrection... but it wasn't quite yet.

In recent days and weeks, we have begun to understand the valley of dry bones in new ways. For the first time in many of our lifetimes, we are watching and waiting for a virus for which there is no immunity, there is no vaccine, there is no cure... to come and run its course. Shopping centers, restaurants, gyms, playgrounds, and even churches that were once filled with life... connected in intricate social and economic webs have closed down, making our whole community feel like a valley of dried up bones.

We sit by and worry: *Can these bones live?*

Of course we are doing our part, staying home and hunkering down. We are praying for the health and well-being of our neighbors. We are working to ensure that people will not go hungry in this time of great instability. We are anxiously watching the stock market, hoping that this incredible dip is not the beginning of a long-lasting economic depression.

We are trying to have faith, trusting that these dried up bones will somehow snap back into motion and that in the end, we will be able to get back to the rhythms of life that we had grown to love.

The more we wait in isolation, the more we work from home and limit our connections to digital interactions, the more we might come to realize that though the bones may eventually rattle back together, life will never be the same again.

For some of us that statement might be incredibly scary. There is so much grief for us as we watch pieces of our old lives pass away. Like the Israelites mourning the loss of their Temple, we are mourning our losses as well.

But I wonder if we might find a little hope in Ezekiel's vision.

Once those bones start snapping back together, scripture says that there was no breath in them... it may have looked like resurrection... but it wasn't, quite yet.

The Lord tells Ezekiel to summon the Ruah, translated Breath, Wind, and Spirit... summon the winds, and the breath of God will blow into these bones... and they will live again.

Sure enough, the faithful prophet does as he is told, and the wind does come.

The word Ruah would have been familiar to the Hebrew people... and it probably should be familiar to us as well. This Hebrew word for Wind, Breath, and Spirit is the name of the divine character who hovers over the chaos at the beginning of Genesis.

*...when the Earth was a formless void, when God began creating the wind of God swept over the waters...*

That same Spirit guides the prophet here, from exile to the valley of dry bones and now she comes again, Ruah, Wind, Breath of God, sweeping in and breathing life into dried up bones.

In the New Testament the same Spirit fills the lungs of Jesus from Nazareth and anoints him to release captives and liberate the oppressed. Then it will be the same Spirit that will breathe upon the frightened and gathered church, on Pentecost, anointing it with new language for a new world.

This wind of God, this Spirit breath, seems to be always blowing in just when death seems certain. And when it comes, dead bodies, old bones, dried up systems and broken down rhythms experience resurrection.

It's a word of hope for all who find ourselves in the midst of the valley of bones. And it is also a word of caution or all who imagine that resurrection will be limited to putting the pieces back the way they were before. Resurrection doesn't look like the bones, snapped back in place... it is not the economy starting back up, it is not business as usual after a brief moment of pause... resurrection is new life, unlike anything we knew before but filled with hope for what is to come.

So as we wait amidst our Lenten wilderness.

As we ask the question: *Can these bones live?*

I wonder if we might be prematurely rushing to resurrection, in hopes that everything might just get back to normal?

And if that is our hope... it might do us some good to sit and stay a while in *this* wilderness. Knowing that when the Spirit *does* blow once again... new life will come... and nothing will ever be the same again.

Easter may be coming... but it isn't here yet.

Prayer:

Oh God we wait amongst the bones,  
tempted to rush to resurrection and yet  
knowing that this wilderness isn't through with us yet.

And so we wait with faith that you are working amongst the bones as they rattle back together.  
We wait with hope that your Holy Spirit, Breath of Life, Wind of Resurrection will once again restore us to the fullness of life...

Oh God we believe that Easter is coming...  
and still we know that it isn't quite here yet.

Be with us while we wait.  
Prepare us for whatever may come...  
And guide us every step along the way.  
Amen.