

**Can These Bones Live?**  
**Sermon 178 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 26, 2023**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

Have y'all ever heard about Boneyard Baptist Church?

I used to pass by it on my morning run. I never stopped in, met the pastor, or worshiped there, but they must have had something good going on because the attendance was consistent and the space seemed to be pretty close to max capacity. The church seemed really well organized and had a good sense of unity (almost veering into uniformity!). All the years we lived in this small town and this church was on my running route, I never noticed any major changes and I never heard anyone in the community complaining about anything that was going on there. It seemed like an ideal church.

The only problem was... it was a cemetery.

Ok, Boneyard Baptist Church doesn't really exist, but I did run past a really old and really large cemetery every morning when we lived in Belmont and I can't help but think about it when I read today's scripture from Ezekiel 37.

Churches often have cemeteries. In fact, the one I used to pass every day was a part of the First Presbyterian Church in Belmont, a large and prominent church in our small town. Theirs wasn't the only cemetery in town, but it was the biggest. And it was the only one that happened to be on Main Street. So folks knew it well and loved it. It was very much a part of living in Belmont. Just like growing used to hearing the horn of the train that drove straight through town at 2am, 4am, and 7am... every. single. day.

Churches often have cemeteries, but what's bad is when churches begin to *become* their cemeteries. When every body in the pews look the same. When things are a little *too* organized and perfectly arranged. When nothing is changing and yes even when no body is complaining, things begin to feel a little, well, dead.

This is not to say we should all go out looking for controversy or start messing around with things just because we are gluttons for change, but there is something seriously lacking when every Sunday of every month of every year of every decade is exactly the same. Yes, rhythm, routine, and ritual are important pieces of our spiritual life and practice but when the routine and predictability of church become the priority of the church, well, we may want to start asking... *Where is the Holy Spirit?*

Last week at the Sunday night book club, we got to talking about that *Spirit*. The one that rattles our dead and dry bones back to life again. Many of us had underlined the part in Rachel Held Evans' book where she writes:

*The Spirit is like wind, like fire, like a bird, like a breath — moving through every language and every culture of this world, bursting out every category and defying*

*every metaphor. Who's to say where She will travel next?*<sup>1</sup>

This came at the end of a section in the book where Evans is sharing some of her own personal struggle with finding any sign of life in the church. The daughter of a seminary professor and a life-long church-goer, Evans reached a point in her life where the doctrines of the church and the covenant of Christianity that had been passed down to her just didn't fit anymore. The world had moved on from the questions of modernity. We'd even landed on the moon! With these discoveries and advancements everything about life as we once knew it began to change. Everything, that is, except the churches. For Rachel and millions of millennials like her, this resistance and refusal to change created a chasm, a deep valley that stretched and spanned between them and the church. Now we can add Gen Z to that list.

Many left the church clinging to their own defiant spirituality, but refusing to give their time, money, and gifts to an institution that no longer showed signs of life.

In other words they were not seeking membership at Boneyard Baptist Church.

So Rachel set out on a quest that she named, *Searching for Sunday*, which she says, "Is less about looking for a Sunday *church* and more about looking for a Sunday *resurrection*."<sup>2</sup>

She, like so many others - and not just people of any one generation - was walking through the valley of dry bones, desperately holding on to hope that the bones could live.

Her voice resounds much like the prophet Ezekiel's when he begins to speak over the bones. His people, too, felt death all around. "They had lost their most cherished theological realities: the land, the temple, and the monarchy."<sup>3</sup> These were the anchors of their relationship with God, the vehicles through which they heard God's voice and felt God's presence. These were the signs of the promise reaching all the way back to Abraham, Moses, and David: the land, the temple, the monarchy. These three are the sum of their religious traditions and now they have all been ripped away.

How will they worship in a foreign land?  
Where will they ever feel at home?  
Would anything ever be the same again?

Any typical onlooker, and maybe even the prophet himself, might have imagined all that would be required in order for these bones that filled the valley to spring back to life. They'd have to get back to Jerusalem, they'd have to be back in their Temple, the Davidic

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 199.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, kindle E-book, loc. 235.

<sup>3</sup> Tyler Mayfield. *Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14*. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-ezekiel-371-14-11>

line of rulers would have to be reinstated - that's how God was last known to work among them so if anything was going to work, surely those pieces would need to be in place.

But God tells Ezekiel something different.

*Speak to the bones, Ezekiel, tell them that I will make breath enter them - here and now - and tell them they will come to life again.*

Remember that breath and wind and Spirit are all the same word in Hebrew (ruach). Could it be that the same breath that gave life to Adam in Genesis is also the same breath, wind, Spirit that will now blow through this valley of death? Could it be that the same Spirit Jesus breathes into the upper room where the disciples experience the resurrected Christ is the same Spirit that summons these bones to life again?

*Speak to the bones, Ezekiel, tell them they can indeed live!*

Ezekiel does exactly as God commands and the bones begin to rattle back to life.

*[Boneyard Baptist Church is starting to get a little more lively!]*

Our Bible is full of resurrection stories - and this is one of them - stories that remind that death and despair never have the final word because our God is a God who brings the dead back to life. We remember the daughter of Jairus in Mark's Gospel, the resurrection of Lazarus in John's, and the resurrection of Jesus!

Here, we find a story about resurrection of the whole community of Israel!

We love to remember these stories because they encourage us and help us to place our hope and our trust in God's ability to save even us from the grip of death. Part of that hope for us is in the eternal nature of the text. Meaning, we don't have to fear death (which we know to be inevitable) because God will raise us to eternal life. This we know.

But, these stories - and this one in particular - have so much more to teach us than that.

None of us (to my knowledge) have ever been physically dead. But we have all experienced the smaller deaths that come in the form of grief and loss, change and exile. We can all remember times when we looked around and everything was different than it was before. When we've been uprooted and tossed out. When home doesn't feel like home anymore. Even when our tried and true pathways to God don't seem to be rendering the results they once did. Our prayers seem to fall on closed ears and our hearts are struggle to connect. We have known a little something of the valley of dry bones.

From these places of deep despair and displacement we have to wonder: *Can these bones live?*

Is there life after loss?

Is my career over?  
Is this all my life will amount to?  
Will my children find and be able to pursue their passion?  
\_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with your dry-bones question here)

*Can these bones live?* We ask along with the prophet.

The poet, Sarah Are Speed says the answer is yes in her original piece written for this year's Lenten journey. But as we read her words we see that even with the conviction of "yes" her voice and verse linger in the questions.

So maybe that is were we too should linger today, in the question, in the searching, in the not-yet-realized hope that hinges on the promise of ancient stories bearing witness to the truth that yes, indeed, even *these* bones can live.

**the answer is yes**  
**by: Rev. Sarah Are Speed**

It's the question we ask at the end of our rope,  
When the storm is raging,  
When the monsters under the bed have  
introduced themselves.

When everything around us seems to be on fire.

It's the question we ask when hope slips through like  
sand in a bottle,  
When the mockingbirds stop singing,  
When the news reporter leads with another mass shooting.

It's the question we ask when the depression moves in,  
Making herself at home, making a mess of it all.

It's the question we ask  
When we're not sure if Easter will come.

Will it be Lent forever?  
Will the sun ever rise?  
Will this hope lead to something?  
Can these bones ever live?

