

Sunday, March 22, 2026

The Fifth Sunday In Lent (Passiontide Begins)

Litany and Solemn Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Mark Schultz

on

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

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Can These Bones Live?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Can these bones live?

We can probably forgive Ezekiel for thinking this is a trick question

Or if not a trick question a very cruel question.

Because: this is probably not the first time Ezekiel has seen this valley,

This spectacle of devastation.

A few years earlier,

Ezekiel would have witnessed the most momentous event, the defining event of his life:

The cataclysmic destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians

In roughly the year 587 BC, followed by a life of captivity and exile in Babylon itself.

This was a total devastation

Not one stone left upon another, the Bible tells us.

And the slain littered on desolate and desolating battlefields around the city, in the city:

This is not the first time that Ezekiel has seen a valley filled with the dead.

And I imagine he would have counted himself very lucky indeed

If he had never had to see anything like it again.

But the hand of the Lord comes upon him

God takes him by the hand

And leads him back

Into the depths of his absolute worst nightmare of loss, panic, grief, horror...

And he asks:

Can these bones live?

Let's be honest: it's not an easy question for anyone.

The world has known a lot of nightmares

On the scale of and surpassing the scale of Ezekiel's own nightmare

It's hard to look at history, to peep into the past,

And not see the contours of the valley of the dry bones anywhere you look,

You don't have to look hard.

And we can see it in the wars and conflicts, fear and uncertainty that plague our world today

And we can see it in our own lives

In our broken relationships
Broken dreams
In those times in our life when
Deep personal loss
When addiction or fear
When violence suffered at the hands of someone we love
When phobias, antagonisms, hatred and hostility
When these things have devastated and desolated
And exiled us from ourselves, from anything and everything we know and love
We can see the valley of the dry bones
We can feel the Valley in our bones.
Yet, in the midst of all that,
God still has the audacity to ask: Can these bones live?

When Jesus knows that gravely-ill Lazarus has died, his response is
“Our friend Lazarus sleepeth.”
Which bewilders the disciples. They have no idea what he’s talking about.
If Lazarus is ill, taking a nap is a good and reasonable thing, why tell them something so trivial?
And why insist on walking into death and danger just to wake someone up from a nap?
But Lazarus has indeed died.
And Jesus sees that, and the dangers into which he knows he’ll be walking,
From a different perspective: he knows something about the whole situation the disciples do not
And probably cannot know,
Because they can’t imagine that death can be anything other than an ending
They can’t imagine that God might have more in mind
For things they think of as dead and gone
For things the world thinks of as worthless or disposable
They’ve not quite understood the contours of the divine imagination
Which is to say: they don’t really know what hope is.
When Jesus says to Lazarus’ sister Martha “thy brother shall rise again”
She affirms that she believes in the resurrection of the dead on the last day
But that’s on the last day
It’ll be better, but only by and by
The idea that new life
Resurrection life
Is available to her now
Standing in front of her now in the One who is The Resurrection and the Life?
That does not occur to her. It is beyond her imagination
How can she hope for something, the shape of which she’s not seen and can’t imagine?
How can she stretch towards what’s coming towards her
If she doesn’t know there’s anything to stretch towards?
But that’s what Christian hope is:
stretching by faith toward the very Real good that is stretching towards us.
But surrounded by paid mourners, weeping friends and relatives
Encased in her own sorrow
All Martha can see is grief, loss. Mourning. Death.
What could possibly be beyond those things?

Jesus says to her: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:
Then he asks her: Believest thou this?
We can probably forgive Martha for thinking it's a trick question.

Ezekiel in the depths of the Valley of bones: all he can see, all he can imagine is death.
There's no place he can look that doesn't have bones in it somewhere.
Can these bones live?

It's a testament to Ezekiel's faith that he doesn't just scream, "No!" And run away.
But the question itself has stirred the prophet's imagination:

He's thinking, "If God's asking the question, maybe there's part of this situation I cannot see. Maybe God can do something with this that I cannot. Maybe desolation does not have the last word after all. Dare I hope," he might have asked himself, "that something good is coming toward me even in the midst of this valley? Dare I stretch toward that good?"

Can these bones live?

Ezekiel dares to hope. He says, "O Lord God, thou knowest."

You. Not me. And I will trust in your knowing.

And having opened the eyes of his heart to God's vision,

God then opens his mouth

God gives him a word of prophecy to speak...and something strange happens

The valley of the dry bones

Shudders with movement

Imagine the sound of all those bones rattling together

Coming together

Imagine the noise

Imagine Ezekiel's wonder at the noise

I imagine he had never heard a noise more loud, more dreadful, more frightening

Or more beautiful in all his life

As the decimated people of Israel, the dead, the lost

The rejected of this world

The oppressed the defeated

Are lifted up by the power of God, the forgotten literally re-membered, knit back together

Standing up on their own two feet.

Prophecy again Ezekiel, prophecy again, God says,

And Ezekiel does

And a WHHOOOOOSH!!!

A WHHOOOOOSH like there has never been heard in the history of the world

As the breath of God breathes life into a dead people

Breathes life into an exiled man

Breathes life into long-forgotten dreams and promises

And Ezekiel standing there amazed

Wide-eyed and slack-jawed

Winded by the wind of God

Hears God say:

"Ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people."

And suddenly, Ezekiel has a glimpse of the imagination of God

For whom death, in all of its forms, in all of its horrors

In sin committed and in sin suffered

Never has the last word.

This is what it is to be “spiritually minded” as Paul exhorts us:

A mind set on the Spirit

Is a mind that thinks with the life-giving imagination of God

A mind for which hope means something real

Because it’s a hope for what is real and real even now:

The life of God that’s breaking into the world

Even now. Because God is not doing anything in the future that God is not already doing now.

Can these bones live?

Jesus, standing in the cemetery, standing at Lazarus’ tomb, surrounded by loud mourners...

The Lord of Life is confronting:

Death the interloper, Death the vision-veiler, Death the devastator

And he’s confronting Death with tears and a holy gut-wrenching indignation and determination

Confronting it with the fullness of his Human, Divine, and Passionate Love for us

Confronting death in the tomb...and in the death-minded crowd around him

In the community defined and constructed by death...

He orders the tomb to be opened.

And the people around him are dumbstruck.

They can’t imagine what’s coming. How can they? They say:

“Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.”

Beloved, in the Incarnation, God has come to us in our darkest mournful nightmare place

Wiped our tears away, taken our hands,

And asked: Can these dry bones live?

But how often have we replied:

Lord, don’t open my grave! It stinks in there!

Lord, don’t look into the dark corners of my life! There’re bones in there!

Lord, don’t open my heart. I’m too afraid, it hurts too much.

Sometimes we can’t imagine what’s on the other side of desolation, of exile

Sometimes we can’t imagine there’s an end to the valley of the dry bones

Sometimes our own sin and its shame limit our imaginations

And sometimes the evils and the injustices we suffer dim our hope

But Beloved, God is still holding your hand,

Even in the midst of the Valley of the Shadow

And God is not letting you go.

Jesus says in our Gospel: Open the tomb.

And they do.

And the Resurrection and the Life, standing in the midst of death,

Shouts to Lazarus, “Come forth.”

But he isn’t just talking to Lazarus.

No: he’s shouting here

Above the weeping and the wailing of the crowd

So that the crowd can hear him.

He’s shouting to the crowd and telling them: “Come forth!”

Out of sin-sick despair, out of sorrow, out of death-centeredness, violent-mindedness.

Come forth and live.
And he's shouting to us, too,
Through the pages of scripture, down through the ages, even now,
From the heights of heaven and from the ground of your very being, he shouts:
"You! Yes, you: Live!
Let me knit those bones together
Let me give you my own flesh and blood
Let me set you on your feet
Let me breathe my life into you
Let me take your desolation and your failure
Let me take your sin, too
And let me give you my own divine life."
Jesus is not willing for us to be lost in the valley of the dry bones.
Not content to call from outside the grave,
Jesus will face danger and death to awaken every death-bound sleeper
He will descend by the ladder of the cross
Into the very heart of the grave itself
And he will break the gates of brass
And rattle the bones of death to splinters
And he will call out to every soul
Through all of time and space,
He calls to us even now:
"Live!"
Be present to the Life that is already present to you now,
Even in the midst of these topsy turvy dark and strange times.
Especially in the midst of these topsy turvy dark and strange times.
Because if you are present to the life that is already present to you now,
You will be a living sign to this shadowed and troublous world
Of a new world that is coming to be, even now, in you.

Can these dry bones live?

Imagine Lazarus
Imagine the shock of breath entering his lungs
The startling sound of his own sudden breathing
Jesus' words shaking his bones,
Singing love and life into the depths of his soul
Imagine him feeling the blood WHOOSH through his body
Imagine him struggling against his grave clothes, his death-bindings,
And seeing,
Obscurely, through the linen grave cloth covering his face,
Imagine him seeing the light pouring into his tomb from the open door
Has he ever seen anything more beautiful?
Imagine him feeling the warm warm sun through shroud touching his warming skin
Imagine him stumbling, stretching, toward the brightness stretching toward him,
From the light-flooded doorway of the open tomb.

Beloved,
That is what God imagines for you, too.
God is loving you, loving all of us, out of the valley of the dry bones.
We're two weeks from Easter:
Can you imagine how much more God desires for you?
The fire of God's own divine life?
The very Sun of Righteousness, dawning in the depths of your being
Transforming you by love into love and with your love changing the world?
That reality is coming toward you even now
In fact, it's closer to you than your very bones:
Dare to hope for it.
And through faith, by grace: stretch for it.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.
