

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

EZEKIEL 37:1-14; JOHN 11:1-45
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
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For the longest time, my son Nicholas has had a fascination with zombies.

Zombies: these rather grotesque-looking dead people come alive and wander around in a trance that populate all kinds of myths and legends and bad horror movies.

(He's not alone here. Zombies have become extremely popular in recent years, with countless TV shows like *The Walking Dead* and major Hollywood films like *World War Z* raking in vast sums of money from the paying public!)

For the longest time, Nicholas has been trying to convince me that they are real.

Often our discussions sound something like this. "Zombies are real." "No, they're not." "Yes they are." "No, they're not." Etc., etc. Pretty inspirational stuff, as you can see ☺.

A few months ago, Nicholas decided to try a different approach.

"Zombies are real, dad." I sighed, getting ready for another go round. "No, Nicky, they're not..."

"Well, I guess you don't believe in the Bible, then."

This caught my attention. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, it says right in the book of John, that Lazarus walked out of the grave after being dead for four days. Lazarus was a zombie!"

And for once, I didn't know quite what to say ☺.

I'm still not sure about zombies, but in both of our passages this morning, the dead take centre stage.

Ezekiel is taken in a vision to a valley littered with the skeletons of the dead.

John takes us to a tomb in the side of a hill where Lazarus lies, dead for four days.

In both cases, scenes of death will be transformed into scenes of life.

The temptation when we read Scripture is always to explain, to apply, to move on. We want to know, what do these texts mean *for us*?

But the more I read the NT, the more I observe how Jesus taught, how he told stories, it seems to me that he frequently left stories “hanging there.”

He didn't always rush to interpret (though he sometimes did later). He didn't always explain. He let his listeners sit with the stories he told. He let them be uncomfortable, he let them wrestle, he allowed them time and space to process (even if this processing was painful work!).

So, I want to begin today by just pausing over these well-known texts.

How do they make you *feel*? What emotions are stirred in you as you hear about a valley of dry bones coming to life?

- Hope?
- Fear?
- Surprise?
- Joy?
- Anticipation?
- Wonder?
- Skepticism?

What questions leap to the front of your mind as you hear about man dead for four days walking out of a cave at Jesus' command?

- Did that *really* happen?
- How can we believe such stories in the age of science?
- Why don't these things happen today?

Which characters do you identify with in these texts?

- Ezekiel, saying “Only you know, O Lord”
- Mary and Martha, saying, “Where were you when we needed you? Why couldn’t you come sooner?”
- The community gathered, weeping over the latest appearance of death?
- The rest of the crowd, standing by, curious, expectant, wary?
- Maybe even Lazarus, stumbling out of the darkness with his grave clothes still on?!

It’s good to just *sit* with Scripture sometimes. Keep these reactions in mind as we look into this text a bit more deeply.

Rather than rushing to explain and “apply” Scripture, one of the questions I prefer to ask, **“What reality do these texts invite us into?”**

Well, on one level it is quite obvious. We are invited into the reality of life with a God who promises that death is never the last word. Life wins in the end.

In Ezekiel’s day, the people of God were languishing in Babylon, far from their homes, suffering judgment for their sins. They were a conquered people. God’s promises to make them a great nation that would be blessed and would be a blessing to others seemed a distant and impossible memory.

Things looked bleak and hopeless.

And yet the message of Ezekiel’s vision was, “this is not the end of the story! There is still hope! These bones that lie strewn about the valley—bones that speak of desolation and death and violence—these bones can be brought to life!”

In John’s gospel, Lazarus had been dead for *four days*!

And yet, Jesus speaks the word, just like the initial voice of God over the chaos and darkness of the formless void in Genesis 1, and life is summoned into being.

The message of both texts is that God—the God of Ezekiel’s vision, the God who took on flesh in Jesus of Nazareth—has the power to wrench life out of the jaws of death.

But we know this, right? We know that in the end, God will finally be victorious over death. Are these just messages of hope for the end of time?

I don't think so.

These are questions that we ask each day as we look out at our world, at our communities, at our churches, at our families, at our own lives.

Can these bones live?

We can pick almost any situation.

My thoughts initially returned to the time we spend in Colombia during our MCC tour a few years ago. All around, we witnessed situations of poverty, injustice, corruption, and apparent hopelessness.

Can these dry bones live? The people we interacted with had little doubt of that answer.

We could ask the same questions about situations around the world.

There is an MCC AB tour in in Israel & Palestine right now. We look at centuries of conflict, and we wonder, *Can these bones live?*

We could look at countless other situations around our world. We could look at the realities named by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada that was just completed... *Can these bones live?*

Or we could look closer to home. A number of us spent yesterday at Mennonite Church Alberta meetings in Didsbury. As many of you know, the financial numbers do not look promising. Many are wondering about what the future of our provincial conference might look like, about what the future of our *churches* might look like... *Can these bones live?*

What about in your life? In mine?

What about those suffering lengthy illnesses? Those walking through the wreckage of relational deterioration? Those who have heard far more “no’s” than “yes’s” in the search for meaningful employment? Those struggling with vocational questions?

What about those who can't break free from cycles of dysfunctional behaviour and bad choices or the power of addictions? What about those who just about given up on long-held dreams? What about those whose faith seems to have withered away in the context of choking doubt and cynicism?

Can these bones live?

Can this smelly rotting corpse stand up and walk out into the light of life?

These are the questions that each of us are faced with in one way or another every day of our lives.

Each day, we are faced with a choice. Will we live as though death or life wins in the end? Will we believe that all things dry up and disappear, or that we were made for more than this world where things are always fading away?

Will we believe that dry bones *can* and *will* come alive, that the dead will rise, even when we still live in the land where death still haunts our steps, even when it seems impossible?

I want to read a passage from Eric Weiner, from the book he wrote about his own spiritual quest called, *Man Seeks God*:

Those three words—in spite of—are the holiest in the English language. As Paul Tillich observes, the answer to every religious question always contains some element of “in spite of.” We are forgiven in spite of our sins. We believe in spite of the lack of evidence. We love our neighbors in spite of their flaws. Or, on a more fundamental level, we get out of bed every morning in spite of the inevitable approach of death. (An act of faith if ever there was one.) There is a huge gap between “because of” and “in spite of,” and in that gap lies the difference between a life of cold reason and a life of faith.

Most of the time we operate in because-mode. Banks lend us money because we have good credit histories. Our employer pays our salary because we contribute to the bottom line. Economic life depends entirely on “because.” The religious life, though, operates in “in spite of” mode... “In spite of” makes a mockery of cost-benefit analysis. It makes no sense, and that is precisely why we need it.¹

¹ Eric Weiner, *Man Seeks God: My Flirtations with the Divine*.

To believe in this God who can bring dry bones to life is not to say that our lives this side of eternity will be lives of unrelenting victory and clarity.

This was not the case in the contexts of our two passages and it is not the case for us today.

The exiles would return, just as Ezekiel's vision proclaimed, but they would never again be the mighty kingdom of David and Solomon. Soon enough, the people of Israel would be under the boot of another empire, this time Rome, and would continue to struggle to live out their calling as the people of God in a strange land.

Lazarus still died an ordinary human death.

We still live in the in between time, in the now but not yet of Christ's kingdom which has come, is coming, and will one day come in its fullness. We still live in the land where things die. We know this.

As the church, we are, to borrow Eugene Peterson's wonderful phrase, "a colony of heaven in the country of death."²

We are the ones that God uses to beckon all of creation forward in the story. We are the ones who say, "We have been given a clue about how the story ends, and it's bad news for death!"

Lazarus's empty tomb prefigures another empty tomb, of course.

In John's gospel, this story of Lazarus being raised from the dead is the last episode before the efforts to kill Jesus take their final, dramatic turn.

We know that the one who breathed life into the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision is the same one who brought back Jesus from the dead.

This is the one we will celebrate in a few weeks—the one who, like Lazarus walked out of the grave. The one who, unlike Lazarus, left the grave clothes behind, and never died again. The one who, as the creed says:

ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

² Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end
“lives and sits at the right hand of the Father.”

We don't make dry bones live. We don't make the dead rise and walk out of their graves. In both texts, it is all about God. *God* breathes life into the dry. *Jesus* speaks the word of life to Lazarus. This is about God, not us.

Life out of death is a God-sized job, and only God can do it.

Our task is to believe, to participate, to trust, to hope, to love, and to proclaim this good news of this good God.

May God breathe his life into our bones as we live into this high and holy calling.

Amen.

