

# I WILL BRING YOU BACK

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*EZEKIEL 37:1-14; JOHN 11:1-45*  
*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*  
*BY: RYAN DUECK*  
*APRIL 2, 2017/5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT*

I'm not sure how you felt when we read the call to worship together this morning.

All those words about weary bones and crushed souls and dashed hopes... On a nice spring-ish day when the sun is shining and the birds are singing? With all the pleasant pre-service chatter still ringing in our ears?

They didn't seem to fit, did they?

You might have preferred something a bit cheerier, maybe more along the lines of, "This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it!"

I felt the same way. But there are a couple of reasons why I think that it's important that we say hard words and give expression to difficult things out loud in our corporate worship.

The first is a theological reason. We are in the season of Lent. And Lent is a season of the Christian year where we intentionally spend time in the "wilderness" with Jesus, where we deliberately hold before ourselves realities that we might prefer to avoid.

The world is not yet as it will be. We are not yet as we will be. We groan.

The second is a more experiential and personal one.

Despite the faces we present for public consumption, there are those among us each Sunday who are groaning.

Those for whom Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dried out bones doesn't feel like an abstract description of a theological truth, but a very personal reality.

Speaking of Ezekiel's vision... In his day, the people of God knew about both the theological and the personal, experiential realities of dry bones.

They were languishing in Babylon, far from their homes, suffering judgment for their sins. They were a conquered people. Their temple had been plundered, their leaders hauled off in chains. 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.

Things also looked bleak and hopeless in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, in John's gospel. Here we encounter not a vision given to a prophet but a personal scene—a scene of sadness and sorrow, of weeping and wondering why.

We come to a tomb in the side of a hill where Jesus' friend Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha lies dead for four days.

Here, too, things look bleak, hopeless.

In both Ezekiel's vision and John's gospel, the question is the same: *Can these bones live?*

It's quite a question, isn't it?

It is in many ways among the deepest and important questions that we can ask. It is a question that can perhaps be reframed in this way:

**Is there any hope for us? Is there any hope for me?**

I was thinking about this question all week... Can these bones live?

I thought about the places that I have been privileged to travel over the past few years. I thought about the people Colombia, the situations of poverty, injustice, and corruption that I witnessed there.

I thought about my visit last year to Israel & Palestine, of the long centuries of intractable conflict, of the despair and hopelessness that seems so pervasive.

I thought about the people of Syria and the civil war that grinds on while the innocent suffer.

I thought about the plight of indigenous people in Canada over the last several hundred years, of our own city where there is still such a massive gulf between indigenous and non-indigenous populations in almost every indicator of social well-being.

*Can these bones live?*

Or we could look at the church. Many, *many* churches, from national denominational structures right down to local churches are looking at aging populations, shrinking budgets, and uncertain futures.

Our Mennonite church is of course not immune from this. Many are wondering about what our future will look like.

*Can these bones live?*

What about in your life? In mine?

We might not be suffering as refugees or negotiating the fallout of civil war or struggling to climb out of a history of colonialism.

We might not have anything as dramatic as a valley of dry bones or a sealed up tomb in our lives, but I've been around long enough to know that hopelessness and despair can come in all kinds of packages.

Sometimes they hide behind a shiny veneer buried beneath the surface.

Maybe we're in the middle of a long struggle with illnesses or chronic pain.

Maybe a relationship is breaking down.

Maybe we're tempted to abandon long held dreams in the face of unemployment or under-employment.

Maybe we feel lonely or unloved.

Maybe we're unable to break free from cycles of dysfunctional behaviour and bad choices or the power of addictions.

Maybe our faith seems to be withering away, choked out by doubt and cynicism.

Maybe we've been Christians for many long years and are rather disillusioned about how poorly our lives reflect what we've been called to.

Maybe it's just simple tiredness. For life can make us tired.

Or perhaps it's just boring old boredom. Days spent numbing the bigger questions of life about meaning and purpose by mindlessly scrolling through the lives of others on social media.

Whatever might be the cause of *our* dry bones, the question behind all of them is the question of Ezekiel 37 and of John 11.

*Can these bones live?*

*Can a body that has been dead for four days stand up and walk out into the light of life?*

*Is there any hope for me?*

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The answer, of course, is yes! Dry bones can come alive, thanks be to God!

To the weary exiles in Babylon, God gives Ezekiel a vision of the dry bones coming together into bodies, of the breath of God breathing life into them again.

*I will bring you back to your land, the Lord says, and you shall know that I am the Lord.*

In the midst of those weeping around Lazarus's tomb, those wondering why Jesus couldn't be bothered to come a little sooner, Jesus says, Lazarus, come out!"

This is the Christian hope. To believe that valleys of dry bones and sealed up tombs aren't the end of the story is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

We are those who never abandon hope that life is possible, even when things look bleak, even when we feel worn out and used up, even when hope is in short supply, even when sorrow threatens to rule out joy.

In his book *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, Eugene Peterson has this wonderful phrase to describe the church: "A colony of heaven in the country of death."<sup>1</sup>

This is who we are.

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!"

We believe this and we live into this hope because our vision has been shaped by stories of dry bones coming to life and Lazarus walking out of a tomb at the summons of Christ.

We believe this because we have witnessed or experienced the goodness of God in turning around situations like those I described above—of seeing relationships restored, of hope reignited, of addictions overcome, of faith restored.

But our belief is based upon more than just stories like these. Because as powerful as these stories are, they don't represent the fulfillment of the hope we all long for.

The exiles would return to Israel, just as Ezekiel's vision promised, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*.

Lazarus walked out of the grave, but he still died an ordinary human death. Indeed, the Pharisees were plotting to kill him almost as soon as the grave clothes had come off in order to stop people from following Jesus (John 12:10-11)!

Our hope is not based on these momentary victories, these little eruptions of heaven in the country of death, important as they are.

Our hope is ultimately based on another set of dry bones and another tomb.

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 who we will celebrate in a few weeks—Jesus Christ, the one who, like Lazarus walked out of the grave, but who never returned, who never died again, who defeated death itself.

You and I 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 bones. *Jesus* speaks the word of life to Lazarus.

Whether it's restoring hope to a people whose spirit is crushed or summoning a dead man from the tomb or promising that death is not the end of our stories, it is God and God *alone* who says, "I will bring you back."

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 the good news of this good God.

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We are only two weeks away from Easter.

Jesus says to us what he said to Martha is the question for us today:

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

To borrow the words of scholar John Wallace,

Do you believe in the God of life who created all that is? Do you believe in Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, who died and rose for us that we might have abundant life? Do you believe in the Spirit of God, the divine breath that brings new life wherever it blows? 'Mortal, can these bones live?' Yes, Lord, most definitely, yes.<sup>2</sup>

We believe this because we know that the bones of a crucified man can and did live, and that the lives we live we now live in him, with him, through him, and for him

Thanks be to God.

Amen.



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<sup>2</sup> John A. Wallace, "Homiletical Perspective on Ezekiel 37:1-14" in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2, Lent Through Eastertide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 127.