

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Festival of Pentecost / Confirmation
May 20, 2018
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
Can these bones live?

—Ezekiel 37:1-14

You know that song (“Ezekiel cried them dry bones”)? It certainly is an unusual and dramatic song. But it should be. It describes an unusual and dramatic event, in the valley of dry bones.

This Ezekiel was a priest born and raised in the nation of Judah. But he was forced away from his homeland at 30 years old, twice the age of the confirmands, two-thirds of mine. In a power move the Babylonians took him to Babylon, hundreds of miles away from home, together with the upper crust of Judean society. The real reason Ezekiel and his people were in exile, though, was not political. It was spiritual. Judah was in exile and the Judean homeland on the brink of destruction because of their sin. The first commandment—you know it—is “love the Lord with all your heart”; but the people went after other gods, which were really no gods at all, and paid the heavy price for doing so. The second greatest commandment—you know it—is “Love your neighbor as yourself”; but the people became self-absorbed, immoral, violent and paid the heavy price for doing so. Twelve years after Ezekiel’s exile started, the hammer dropped back home. Jerusalem was captured and destroyed, people were put to death by the sword, and the land was turned into a desolate waste. That’s what human sin does. In the end it always brings destruction and death.

Ezekiel heard about that catastrophe back home. Some time passed, and then he was given a vision. The Spirit of the LORD gave him this unusual, dramatic experience. It was multisensory. Ezekiel could see, hear, and feel things that people don’t normally experience. It all took place in a valley of bones. The surface of the valley was littered with the dead bones of an entire army. Thousands and thousands of mix-and-match skulls, backbones, femurs, hands, and toes. There are creepy and eerie war stories of live soldiers having to crawl among and walk around and run over the dead bones of soldiers who perished months before on the same battlefield. In the wilderness of the American Civil War. In the trenches of World War One. But Ezekiel’s vision was creepier and eerier than that. Ezekiel was alone, all by himself, walking among bones. Dry ones, bones from men long gone. Imagine how quiet it must have been. The only sound in the whole valley would have been Ezekiel’s footsteps. And when he stopped to survey the scene, it must have been dead quiet. Bone dead quiet.

Until there was a voice. “*Son of man...*” That term God always used to address Ezekiel. That humbling term that reminded Ezekiel of his mortal place before God. “*Son of man, can these bones live?*” Humanly speaking, Ezekiel knew that dead bones don’t live, they don’t come back to life. But Ezekiel wasn’t talking to a human being. He was being asked a question by God, and he answered appropriately. “*O Lord GOD, O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.*” “You, Lord, have the answer to that question, and only you.” Even the most hot shot doctor will admit he can’t make a man live forever, much less bring him back to life after the man has officially died. And as for making the antique, dry bones of a man long dead live again, well, now we are just being silly, aren’t we? “*Son of man, can these bones live?*” “*LORD God, you know.*”

“*Prophecy! Speak the word of the LORD—my word,*” says the LORD! So Ezekiel finds himself talking to dry bones. How preposterous is that?! “*Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! The LORD says, ‘I will bring you breath and you will live. I will place tendons on you, I’ll form flesh on you and spread skin over you. I will put breath in you, and you will live. And you will know that I am the LORD.’*” In Ezekiel’s own words: “*I prophesied just as I was commanded. As I prophesied, there was a sound. Wow! A rattling! Bones came together, bone to bone. I looked and—wow!—tissues and flesh came on, skin spread over them, but there was no breath in them.*” Now it’s creepier and eerier than before. No more piles of bones, but lifeless bodies scattered all over the valley floor.

Another command from God. “*Prophecy! Speak the word of the LORD—my word,*” says the LORD! So Ezekiel finds himself talking to breath, to thin air. How absurd is that?! “*The LORD says come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain [all these who were killed] so they might live.*” In Ezekiel’s own words: “*I prophesied just as he commanded me, and the breath came on them and they lived. They stood up on their feet, an army, a very, very great army.*” Moments before, bones, dry bones. Now, thousands and thousands of men, standing attention at the word of the Lord. How ‘bout that?

Why would God give Ezekiel such an unusual, dramatic event? God explains. God’s people in Israel had lost hope. They felt completely cut off. They saw no reason to believe anymore. So the LORD had something to say about that. A series of I’s. Listen to the LORD speak: “*I am opening your graves and raising you from them. I will bring you to the land of Israel. I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live. I will give you rest in your land. I promised and I will do it.*” In the midst of all these I’s, two you’s. “*You will live. You will know that I am the LORD.*” Can these bones live? Oh yes, they can live. The LORD makes bones live. He just speaks the word, and bones live.

Parents hold a newborn baby. A child fearfully and wonderfully made by God, bones and skin knit together by God in the mother's womb. A wonderful creation of God. At the same time, a child sinful from birth, sinful even from the point of conception. You could say the work of the devil is in that child. Jesus himself said, "Flesh gives birth to flesh." Nothing good lives in the parents' sinful natures. Nothing good lives in the child's sinful nature either. Born without true fear of God or true faith in God, the newborn child is spiritually dead. So the Lord asks new parents, "Hey parents, these little bones you are holding in your arms, can these bones live?" "You alone know, Lord, you alone know." So Jesus says, "Yes, flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. To see the kingdom of God, a person must be born again. To enter the kingdom of God, a person must be born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3). So in our Lutheran churches we baptize babies, babies like you once were. I encouraged you in catechism to find out your baptism date and remember it. God put his Spirit on you, and you lived. Through your baptism God showed that these bones can live.

Pastors prepare for a new year of catechism class. Pastors prepare a course of instruction for young people 12 and 13 years old. Precious sons and daughters of their parents, of course. But the pastor also knows these kids have the same sinful nature in them that their parents have and that he has, too. The same spiritual laziness that is in him is in them. They are as easily distracted as he is. They have the same inborn hostility to all the things of God. They have the same dull bones in their body that just do not grasp the things that come from the Spirit. I've told you in catechism that Pastor Gran and I can teach you, we can review with you, we can quiz you and help you to answer questions. But I can't make you believe any of it, neither can Pastor Gran, nor can Pastor Buchholz or Pastor Pautz. We can't give you faith and eternal life. So the Lord asks pastors, "Hey pastors, these bones you have sitting in front of you, can these bones live?" "You alone know, Lord, you alone know." So Jesus says, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are life." We have nowhere else to go. Only Jesus has the words of eternal life. So in our Lutheran churches we have you search the Scriptures and we teach you the basic truths of the Bible. You have learned these truths and you are confessing them today. Through your time in the Word of God, God showed that these bones can live.

Now God asks that question of you about yourself. As you move ahead in your young life, make your way to high school and things beyond, God-willing, the question constantly stays on the table. "Hey person, hey you, can these bones of yours live? Can they stay alive?" "Oh, sure. When I'm in trouble I'll just pray about it. God won't ever give me more than I can handle anyway. And I'll make sure to keep my faith strong." A little different answer than, "You alone know, Lord," isn't it? Your Christian faith, your spiritual life is going to be threatened. Everything we have taught you, everything you have learned to know from the Bible, everything you believe today, all of it is going to be challenged as you move ahead, probably sooner than later. God's creating of this world will be denied. God's gift of marriage and sexuality will be distorted. Jesus and his self-sacrificing death will be mocked. Jesus' resurrection will be questioned. Hell will be laughed at as something only a dumb old church would teach to scare people. Heaven will be despised as an imaginary fairytale place which stupid people look forward to while wasting their time on earth. I hope you hear in those voices the voice of the devil and the voices of dead men's bones that do not have the Spirit of God in them.

The question is still on the table. "Hey person, hey you, can these bones of yours live? Can they stay alive?" "You alone know, Lord, you alone know." Yes, these bones can live. These bones do live. These bones will live. They can stay alive. By the word of the Lord and by the Spirit of our God.

The most important thing we teach you at Emmanuel, hands down, is that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life for you, died for your sins, and rose from the dead to make you not guilty before God. Next to that, probably the most important thing we try to impress on you is that God works through the means of grace. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life for you, died for your sins, and rose from the dead to make you not guilty before God. And God strengthens and grows and increases and sustains faith in Christ through the gospel in Word and sacraments. That is the way he does it. That is the only way he says he does it. The means of grace. The means of grace. The gospel in Word and sacraments. The gospel in Word and sacraments. Practically speaking, that means attend church. Receive the Lord's Supper. Continue in Bible study, like teen Bible study on Sunday mornings this summer, where you can build on what you have learned. Read the Bible in your personal time. Always continue learning what God already gave you at your baptism. You will spend a lifetime learning what God already gave you at your baptism. Grow in your knowledge of the truths you are confessing your faith in today. Hear the word of the Lord.

As you hear the word of the Lord, and as you keep hearing the word of the Lord, the Lord will give you his Spirit. You will have faith. You will know God's love. You will have hope for eternal life. After all, the Lord's word is *the* answer to the Lord's question: Son of man, parents, pastors, people, you, can these bones live? Listen to the Lord's answer one more time. (Reprise of the song)