

Ezekiel 37:1–14 (CJB)

With the hand of *ADONAI* upon me, *ADONAI* carried me out by his Spirit and set me down in the middle of the valley, and it was full of bones. He had me pass by all around them—there were so many bones lying in the valley, and they were so dry! He asked me, “Human being, can these bones live?” I answered, “*Adonai ELOHIM*! Only you know that!” Then he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones! Say to them, ‘Dry bones! Hear what *ADONAI* has to say! To these bones *Adonai ELOHIM* says, “I will make breath enter you, and you will live. I will attach ligaments to you, make flesh grow on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you. You will live, and you will know that I am *ADONAI*.” ’ ”

So I prophesied as ordered; and while I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound; it was the bones coming together, each bone in its proper place. As I watched, ligaments grew on them, flesh appeared and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Next he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath! Prophecy, human being! Say to the breath that *Adonai ELOHIM* says, ‘Come from the four winds, breath; and breathe on these slain, so that they can live.’ ”

So I prophesied as ordered, and the breath came into them, and they were alive! They stood up on their feet, a huge army! Then he said to me, “Human being! These bones are the whole house of Isra’el; and they are saying, ‘Our bones have dried up, our hope is gone, and we are completely cut off.’ Therefore prophecy; say to them that *Adonai ELOHIM* says, ‘My people! I will open your graves and make you get up out of your graves, and I will bring you into the land of Isra’el. Then you will know that I am *ADONAI*—when I have opened your graves and made you get up out of your graves, my people! I will put my Spirit in you; and you will be alive. Then I will place you in your own land; and you will know that I, *ADONAI*, have spoken, and that I have done it,’ says *ADONAI*.”

Can These Bones Live?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: April 6, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

“Once upon a time, a very long time ago, over thirty years ago, there was a Harvard Divinity School student, who was in his first parish field education placement. In his placement he preached; he preached almost all the Sundays after the major holidays, for the low Sundays were given to the one on the lowest rung of the ladder. But that was actually fine with him, for he was nervous preaching even on the low Sundays in those days.

One of his other duties was to lead a weekly service at a local nursing home. Perhaps the greatest challenge in this service for this particular student minister was the music. He couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. As far as he could tell, none of the residents in the nursing home could either. So after several weeks of unaccompanied, off-key and volume-wavering renditions of “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,” he decided he needed more help than God seemed willing to presently provide. He gave up singing and bought a record. Now, some of you may be too young to remember records or the artist that was on this one. He bought an LP vinyl record of Kate Smith singing Christian hymns in her booming and sweet voice that was decidedly on-key. Week after week the record served them well. At the appropriate moment in the service, the student would nod to the activities director in the back of the room, and she would drop the needle on the pre-arranged track, and everyone would sit back and listen to Kate fill the room with inspiring music.

In that year long ago, fall slowly passed into winter, and winter even more slowly passed into spring. They worshiped together week after week, the residents, the student minister and the voice of Kate Smith. Suddenly the student minister realized something he had never thought of; he would have an opportunity to preach an Easter sermon, certainly not in the church, but here among his friends in the nursing home. Enthusiastically he prepared a rousing Easter message for them. Enthusiastically he delivered the same. Feeling that exhilarated exhaustion that enthusiastic preaching produces, he waved to the activities director to drop the needle on the record and readied himself for the capstone of his first ministerial Easter. He readied himself for Kate Smith to belt out, “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!”

Down the needle went, right on cue Kate's voice filled the room, and to the student minister's horror she was singing, “Your toe bone connected to your foot bone, your foot bone connected to your ankle bone.” The young minister jumped around anxiously deflated, if there is such a thing. Unfit for ministry he was sure he was. He had ruined his first Easter sermon, ruined a perfectly good Easter worship service with Kate Smith blasting out “the knee bone's connected to the thigh bone” right at the most sacred moment.

I don't remember much about the content of that first attempt at preaching Easter. But my guess was that I said something like, “We may know discouragement and disappointment now, but in the bye and bye everything will be alright.” And you know what? I still believe that. I believe that in the bye and bye everything will be alright.

I'm pretty sure that's what I preached in that sermon in the nursing home. I preached the end of the story. I preached that things would be alright. And that was a safe enough message

when Kate Smith was going to sing Christ the Lord Is Risen Today. It was safe enough to preach the end of the story in those general and broad terms of resurrection. But I can tell you it is not safe at all to preach the end of the story in front of a group of men and women whose bones were threatening disconnection and then have Kate Smith sing about bodies reconnected and mended together joint by joint. It wasn't so much that it was silly song for Easter; it was that the song was altogether too appropriate and made a mockery of my pious pronouncements. If I probe for the real source of the queasiness in my stomach that day so long ago in the nursing home, it has to be that I had unwittingly suggested that I, or the faith I professed, could mend their bones. I promised too much.

"Human being, can these bones live?"

"God only knows."

Or maybe more truthfully said, "Are you kidding me, God. Look at them. No, God, I do not think these bones can live."

It sounds sacrilegious to say that, doesn't it? Aren't we supposed to put our trust in God? Isn't that the whole point?

Somewhere outside the city of Jerusalem on a spring day early in the first century at three in the afternoon on a Friday Jesus, quoting Psalm 22 in Aramaic, cried out, "*Elohi! Elohi! L'mah sh'vaktani?*" (which means, "My God! My God! Why have you deserted me?")

None other than Jesus cried out these words, words of utter despair—abandoned, deserted, forsaken by God. Even Jesus faced the human condition of death. When Jesus took on human flesh, he got the whole experience. We make his suffering silly if we think that his betrayal and death were all for show. Whatever Jesus foresaw, whatever he understood to be the inevitability of his crucifixion and death, no matter who he understood himself to be, he experienced death and God's abandonment in the most human of ways.

"Son of man, can these bones live?"

His answer erupts from the wooden stake to which he was nailed, "*Elohi! Elohi! L'mah sh'vaktani?*"

"Son of man, can these bones live?"

"No," he says. "These bones are about to die."

Indeed, this moment, this truth is the point of the greatest disagreement between Jesus and his followers. They wanted those bones to live. If Jesus' bones could live, if he could avoid death, if he could usher in the end of the age and bring about the era of life everlasting right here, they would get the payoff for their faith.

A little while before this, up on the mountain Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was. Peter boldly claimed that Jesus was the Messiah. But when Jesus agreed and then said that he would be arrested and crucified, Peter flew into a rebuke. If these bones cannot live, meant Peter, what does it mean that you are the Messiah? At that Jesus called Peter the devil and told the disciple to get behind him.

In Mark's version of the story, in the very next chapter, Jesus repeated the prediction of his suffering and death. We are told that the disciples again did not understand him. Indeed, on the way to their next stop, the disciples argued among themselves as to which of them was the greatest. They were essentially saying to one another, "When these bones of the Messiah live, I will be the greatest." They said these things right after Jesus explicitly told them that these bones would not live.

In the next chapter Jesus predicted, for the third time in as many chapters, the brutal end that awaited him. At the same time James and John were jockeying to sit on his right and left in the kingdom. “When these bones live, we want the good seats,” they meant.

Not a long time later, from afar, at a distance, having scattered when the bone-crushing began, they heard their hope cry out, “*Elohi! Elohi! L’mah sh’vaktani?*” They heard their hope cry out, “It is finished for these bones.”

This season of Lent doesn’t let us paper over the disappointment there is in the Gospel. This Good News is more than a little tough to take.

Jesus’ disciples, and even Jesus himself, do not actually get what they want. Standing as a young preacher in the nursing home those many years ago, I was utterly helpless to give the people what they most wanted. There was no way that I or my faith would keep those hurting residents from their mounting losses. I could not restore to them their robust bodies or anything else they had lost. And today, as a much older preacher, I stand here before you equally feeble.

Every one of you has experienced terrible losses and disappointments. Every one of you has prayed for dry bones to live and instead have seen them turn to dust. Every one of you carries prayers today, hoping against hope that the dry bones for which you pray will live. And to be sure, our prayers are sometimes answered just as we want them to be. And sometimes in compassion and service we help one another restore life in the valley of the shadow of death. But in the end, not one of us gets to stand in the valley of dry bones and get our prayers answered all the time, at least not answered in the way we pray for them to be. This season that leads up to those desperate words spoken from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you deserted me?” refuses to let us look away from the deep, inescapable pain of life. We cannot avoid the defeat. We cannot avoid losing everything, even our sense of God’s presence. Not even Jesus could. Not even Jesus could.

Therein is our despair. But therein also is an opening, a crack of possibility. Our pain and loss are inescapable. We know that. We experience that far too often to deny it. But at the very least, and this is much more than nothing, we have a God who, through Jesus, knows this very same experience. Think for a moment how extraordinary that is. Gods who look down from above, who stand above all hurt and feeling, who see our anguish but who in their remote perfection have no way of understanding what they witness, are like a man at a banquet trying to empathize with a man scouring a dumpster for dinner. Such Gods have but little to say to us. We cannot entrust them with our deepest hurts and hopes. But God, who in Jesus, cried out to God in abandonment, is a God I trust to have felt the full force of my deepest desolation. This God I can trust. Emmanuel. God with us. God like us.

There’s more of course than God’s great empathy for our condition. Indeed, in Ezekiel the dry bones rattle to life. In the Gospel Good Friday is followed by Easter. But neither of these is a simple reversal of anguish. God does not say, “Oh, just kidding about all that pain.” Easter nor the story of the dry bones is simply the celebration of a close call, almost dead for good but saved at the bell. Ezekiel’s vision addresses Israel in Exile in Babylon. It is meant to tell of her return to the land. But the rest of the Bible gives clear testimony that the former kingdoms will not be restored the way they were, nor will defeat and failure depart from them.

Easter didn’t restore the band of Galileans with Jesus as their leader, either. It wasn’t just three days to think about things and then everything was fixed. The things that Peter, James and John, and the others, too, most wanted were gone, lost—both Jesus and what they wanted from him. There is no continuity between Friday and Sunday. It’s a complete break. The new life in Easter is not just the old life with frosting on it to make it even better. Easter does not reach back

into history and change the events of life to our liking. Indeed, the promise of Easter comes only after the hopes of this age have been utterly dashed. There is a chasm between Good Friday and Easter. For now, we stand on the Good Friday side of things. The other side is unknown and utterly different. Jesus didn't just wake up, like Lazarus. Standing here, we are unable to see to the other side. Dry bones stretch as far as we can see. Standing here there are, however, two things may encourage us. God knows what we go through. And God will accompany us not only through the anguish here but also on the journey across the chasm. For this we say, thanks be to God. Amen.