

SCRIPTURE'S GREATEST HITS

Can These Bones Live?

Ezekiel 37:1-14

July 2, 2023

This morning, I want to talk about revival. Have you ever been to a revival? In the small town where our family lived until I was in fourth grade, a group of churches would come together the first week of August every summer. These small congregations would pool what resources they had to rent a big tent. We would send out fliers and hang posters and invite each of the pastors in that small community to participate. Now, my dad got to preach one night every year, but it was Ivan Lowery I really wanted to hear. Ivan Lowery was the pastor of the Mt. Vernon Presbyterian Church just about two miles away from our congregation, and Pastor Ivan, especially to an eight-year-old kid, was larger than life. He had one of those booming, voice-of-God preacher voices. The power of his proclamation and the poetry of his words would fill that tent like an earthquake. And all of us would be there together, sweating in the humidity of a southern July night as Ivan Lowery delivered the message. Now I'm sure I'd heard the story of Ezekiel before, likely in Sunday school, but it was Ivan Lowery who brought that story to life for me as a kid. He said this story was the first revival. He explained that the word means "to live again." And then that's the invitation that Pastor Ivan, whose congregation had been founded by former slaves in 1870, gave us over and over again. He said it dozens of times. *Come back to life. Come back to life. Come back to life.*

And so, this morning I want to talk about revival.

Mortal, can these bones live?

In the words of our nine-year-old son Samuel, this scene is spooky—Ezekiel led to the middle of a dark valley filled with dry bones, lifeless and long gone.

But this is not some random assortment of anonymous skeletons we're talking about. God tells us, tells the prophet, whose they are—*these are the bones of your people*. The whole house of Israel. The whole community of faith. These bones belong to you. A dusty, deadly desert filled with lost friends and former glory. These are *your* bones.

The ones that have been crushed by oppression. Beaten down and left for dead. The context of the passage is collective crisis. This shadowy valley, the ultimate vision of human disaster. And so, the question God asks the prophet is both urgent and uncertain.

Mortal, can these bones live?

If you've been in the valley, you understand the question. For some of us it is a passing place of temporary discomfort, a waystation on the wilderness journey. But for others, the valley is home. The conditions are chronic. The pain is permanent.

The bones belong to us. They belong to those who have been crushed under the weight of it all. The bones belong to congregations once filled on Sundays with faithful souls and now struggling for weekly survival. These bones belong to families who come home from low wage jobs to find eviction notices posted on doors and empty refrigerators. They belong to faithful souls raised in the church, where they were told they were loved just as they are and then turned away *because* of who they are.

These bones belong to us. They belong to our siblings in Christ whose lives are made difficult by the circumstances of their birth, the color of their skin, the language they speak, or the place they call home.

These bones belong to us because we, too, are part of a world grown weary by division, distraction, and destruction of what matters most—that torn fabric of community, the sting of isolation, the corrosive effect of anger and distrust.

Mortal, can these bones live?

I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.

Bookends of divine encounter.

Question: *Can these bones live?*

Answer: *I will put my spirit within you.*

The space between the question and the promise is where we spend our lives. And so, what does faithful living look like between the question and the promise? What is the work of Jesus followers in this zone of the unknown, this arena of liminality, this gap between what is and what could be?

Can these bones live?

The question is not rhetorical. It invites honest, vulnerable soul-searching. It goes to the heart of who we are. These bones belong to us. What of life is left in them? After all, they're good bones. They've just aged a bit, depleted by the decades. They're good bones but so dry and disconnected. They're good bones, but to tell the truth, they haven't moved in years.

Can these bones live?

What is begging to be born in the dusty pile? What is waiting expectantly for a burst of life? Ezekiel answers God's question with a prayer I hear in a voice of desperation. *O Lord God, you know.*

This is when the miraculous movement begins. It happens when this human agent of divine possibility speaks hope into a valley of despair, speaks life into the shadow of death.

Speak to the bones, God says.

Tell them. Tell them it is not over yet. Tell them there is still work for them to do, still life for them to live, still joy for them to experience. It occurs to me that God could

have used any means of restoration, but the choice of the Divine is to empower the human voice as a channel for sacred truth. Only then, when the prophet speaks, does life begin to stir in those old bones.

The core conviction of our shared faith—the rock on which we stand when all else fades and fails—is the sturdy belief in a God who brings life out of death. We are a resurrection people. We worship and seek to follow a Risen Lord, and so we know deep in our souls and in our collective memory that these dry bones can live—but only if the Spirit of God is breathed afresh in the valley of death. *Revival.*

I want to be clear. If we do not believe that God can bring life out of death, then the church of Jesus Christ has nothing to offer. Nothing to offer a context, a culture, a country that looks like that valley of dried-up bones. We should simply close our doors and distribute our assets.

But, if resurrection is our message, then ours is an essential voice of prophetic power the world must hear. I hope you know where I stand. I trust that the Spirit of God can, does, and will resurrect the bones of what has been, into a life we could not imagine. I trust that there is always hope because God just keeps breathing new life into old bones.

Can these bones live?

Yes, I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.

There it is. *Revival.*

You shall live again. Why? Because God has work for you to do. Friends, this is no time to deny it, hide it, reject it, or ignore it. God has work for us to do.

And it's time to come back to life. Time for bold steps. Time for courageous faith. Time to listen to that voice that whispers to you in the middle of the night—this is the moment, your one chance at life on this earth. Don't simply wallow in the valley of dusty bones and miss it.

God gives a spirit of life. To refuse it is to reject resurrection. To accept it is to join God on a journey that will transform you. You'll lose some things and grieve the losses. Redemption does not come without risk and real cost. But the abundant life that awaits us is worth it all.

I will put my spirit within you, and you will be revived.

You will discover a life you didn't know you could have, a purpose you thought had passed you by, a power beyond your capacity to explain it.

Yes, my friends, we know the valley because the bones belong to us. They are our people. People who contemplate ending their lives rather than living with the pain of rejection. Imagine that. People who grieve unthinkable loss because of violence we have come to call normal or acceptable. These bones belong to us. People whose days pass without meaningful interaction. These bones belong to us. People whose nights are filled with fear about what tomorrow may bring. Their bones belong to us.

We know this valley and we know the call. *Speak to the bones.* Speak to your people. Tell them about a God whose grace is beyond their comprehension, whose love is without condition. Tell them about a God who knows just what to do with a pile of bones. Find the courage to speak hope into despair and truth into lies.

You know the call. Not an easy task. Not a superficial message. I'm talking about revival today. To live again we must speak into this dry valley. We must speak truth. Friends, the word of God and the Christian Gospel have nothing in common with derisive rhetoric and pernicious policies that hurt people God loves even when that rhetoric is thinly veiled in pseudo-religious language. We will not find life by attacking each other. We will not find life by bullying the weak, demeaning our differences, or spouting self-righteous slander. Nor will we find life in half-hearted commitment to disciplines of discipleship. We will not

find life in some vague spirituality that asks nothing concrete of us. If we are unwilling to give ourselves fully to God without counting the cost, it will never be enough and it will always feel like too much.

There is another way. The image of God in every human encounter. Revival. A stirring of life in the valley of death. Flesh joined to the bones. Breath in the lungs. Fire in the heart. I can hear the voice of Ivan Lowery ringing in the ears of an eight-year-old child.

Speak to the bones.

Come back to life.

God is not finished yet.

Can these bones live? Surely you know. Amen.