

## Can These Bones Live?

Ezekiel 37

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June 4, 2006

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

In the fall, we take the Confirmation students on a retreat. The purpose of the retreat is to draw out of the students their pressing theological questions, for it is their questions that drive the curriculum for the rest of the year. If we were to take you on such a retreat, what would your questions be?

In the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel, God has invited the young prophet on what amounts to a confirmation retreat. However, on this retreat, the tables are turned, and it is God who poses the question. God puts a loving arm around Ezekiel's shoulders, walks him to a point of high ground where there is a good view of the valley. Together, they survey the valley and what they see is that the valley is full of bones, dry bones, white, sun-bleached human bones. And it is God who asks the big question, "Can these bones live?"

Ezekiel takes another good look at all the bones: femur, phalange and humerus; skull and knee cap and mandible; rib and tibia and pelvis; shattered, scattered, and smattered. God's question rings in his ear like the sound of a Tibetan prayer bowl. He considers the question, "Can these bones live?" and he replies a three word reply. I have always liked the King James Version here. Ezekiel confesses, "Only thou knowest." In a way, these few words comprise a most wonderful faith statement.

In the Confirmation process, we end the year with faith statement conferences, thirty minute huddles at which each confirmand reads aloud the statement of belief he or she has struggled with for weeks! Typically, they are several paragraphs in length, sometimes several pages. Excerpts from this year's crop of faith statements appear on the insert in today's bulletin. But, here, in three words, young Ezekiel makes a remarkable pronouncement, "Only thou knowest."

I love this three word faith statement because it says, in essence, 'I am not God. There are some things I do not know. There are some things only God can know.' Ezekiel hears God's question and is simply awed by it. "Only Thou knowest."

In my view, this story of the valley of dry bones is one of the three most important stories in the Old Testament. In this story, God is revealed as a power of resurrection; God is a force who brings life to death, joy to sadness, mending to brokenness. What Ezekiel can not even imagine, God can imagine. What lies way beyond the experience of Ezekiel lies well within the experience of God. Ezekiel can see only disconnected bones; God can see a whole new creation. Ezekiel can see only the cocoon; God can see the butterfly.

At God's urging, Ezekiel speaks to the bones. He encourages the bones. Like Jen Rizzoti at half-time, down by twenty points, giving the locker room pep talk, Ezekiel assures the bones they can come back to life in the second half. I can almost hear him speaking to those bones.

'Come on tibia, I know it looks bleak, but with God as my witness, you will walk again! Come on ulna, I know you're fractured in three places, but with God as my witness, you'll be springing hand stands again!

Come on spinal column, I heard your vertebrae crackling like popcorn in a microwave oven, but with God as my witness, you'll be mauling firewood again real soon!

He encouraged the bones with a word from God, and the hip bone came together with the thigh bone and the thigh bone with the leg bone and the leg bone with the ankle bone and pretty soon they were dancing in the valley as if it were the junior prom in Glastonbury, Connecticut. This story reveals the resurrecting power of our God!

Every year, sooner or later, I get around to telling the sophomore confirmation students about my own valley of dry bones. I tell them how I managed to fail English in my 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. I recall for them that moment when Mr. Stanley Burnham looked me in the eye on the steps of Ford Hall and announced to my face that repeating the class in summer school would be just the right thing for me. I looked back at him; actually looked right through him, to what I can only describe as a valley of dry bones...dried up poems, wilted vocabulary, sun-scorched book reports, bone white Shakespearian plays, skeletal term papers. All I could see in that moment was death! It seemed to me that my life had come to an abrupt end! If God had asked me, 'Can these bones live? Can these poems come back to life? Can grammar breathe again? Can a novel reveal the meaning of life?' I believe I would have replied with an unwitting faith statement, "Only Thou knowest!"

And what I discovered is that God really does take what has died and breathes the breath of life into it! Our God is a resurrecting God! God sent Ezekiel into my valley of bones. God sent women and men to encourage me, peers to support me, friends to stir my imagination, mentors to call me back to life. God sent me a soccer coach named George Price and a modern dance teacher named Shirley Rushing, and a chaplain named Raymond Judd, and together they encouraged me back to life.

When my first real job turned out to be teaching English in a tenth grade classroom, I knew for sure that God knows what I can not know, that God sees what I can not see, that God hopes when I can hope no longer.

When I stepped into that classroom and stood on the opposite side of the desk, I knew for sure that God is able to take our most painful moments, our worst failures, what feels like a death; and brings it back to life again.

At one time or another, God takes each of us on a little confirmation retreat. God puts a holy arm around our shoulders and takes us out to a point of high ground, and together we survey our own personal valley of dry bones. We see our failures. We see our disappointments. We see our rejections. We see our darkest days. We take it all in. And God asks each of us, "Can these bones live?" And when we reply, "Only Thou knowest," then God's resurrection energy is released. And all kinds of people come into our lives to encourage us, to bless us, to uplift us, to partner with us, to help us to see the dawning of a new day!

Can these bones live? Only Thou knowest!

This is the message I wanted to preach on this Day of Pentecost, this Confirmation Day! In the greatest of hope, Amen!