

Rev. Danny Mackey
Second Sunday of Easter
April 8, 2018
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Son of man, can these bones live?”

Our culture teaches us that we can trust no one but ourselves, we must “look within,” we must “dig deep down inside,” the “power is in us waiting to be unleashed.” What a lie! But that lie is extremely effective in marketing to self-focused people.

If you’re like me—and I know some of you are exactly this way—when you get sick, you tend to think that your sickness isn’t really that big of a deal. If you just take care of yourself enough, you’ll get better on your own. But the truth of the matter is that if you snap your leg in two, you realize awfully quickly that you can’t do anything for yourself, that there’s no “digging deep down inside.” There’s no power in you waiting to be unleashed. At that point, you’re powerless and in need a doctor. You need one now, and you know it!

We’re often tempted to think, “My sinfulness isn’t that big of a deal. I’ll just do a little better on my own.” And so sin breeds more sin. Sin says “I look to myself for everything,” “I can build my own empire,” “Everything that I have is fundamentally mine,” and “Whatever I can do and whatever I can achieve is by my own power and to my own glory.” Let me tell you a little bit about what you achieve by your own power and by putting “me” first:

Take a stroll down to the cemetery—any in town will do—there’s at least four. Walk through the cemetery among the rows and rows of headstones, sit down, and ponder things. Sooner or later, it’ll hit you. Oh, how you live your lives as if the stench of the grave doesn’t await you! Yet it does, for the wages of sin is death! “Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return.”

Ezekiel was a prophet during one of the darkest times in Israel’s history, to another group of self-focused people. The Israelites were already captive to the Babylonians. God sent Ezekiel with the message to His people: Jerusalem will fall and the Temple will be burned. What a prophecy! I wonder how it affected Ezekiel’s popularity. These were dark days indeed, yet there was hope—something our culture seems to repeatedly forget. You see, even God’s judgments ultimately reflect His grace. They reflect His grace because God’s Law is used to break “spiritual” legs. As Jesus once said, “Those who are well have no need

of a physician, but those who are sick do" (Mt 9:12).

Once news had reached the Jews in Babylon of this destruction, God's Word through Ezekiel became one of consolation and hope for His people. They realized that even the destruction of the Temple was God's will. God breaks down in order to build up. They would be revived, restored, resurrected to a new life, but this wouldn't take place by their own power but by God's power alone. God alone heals spiritual wounds and gives new life.

Ezekiel learned this as he was walking through a cemetery one day. In that graveyard, God taught Ezekiel how powerful He truly is. God takes Ezekiel from his home and brings him out into the very valley in which God spoke to him about the coming judgment on the people. This time it was full of bones. Ezekiel stood in the midst of these very, very dry bones, for these bodies were long dead, far beyond the human hope of being resuscitated.

Standing in the midst of this valley of death, God asked Ezekiel, *"Son of Man, can these bones live?"* Looking around him, Ezekiel could only respond, *"O Lord God, You know!"* In other words: "No, unless you make it so!" Then God said to Ezekiel, *"Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.'"*

Ezekiel did exactly as God commanded. While he was still speaking, he heard and witnessed flesh appearing and joining bones, tendons attaching to tendons, and skin covering everything around him as far as his eyes could see in this cemetery.

Yet there was no life, because there was no breath in them, until Ezekiel prophesied with God's very words a second time as God commanded. Then breath entered these now formed but lifeless bodies. They came to life and stood on their feet, like attentive and readied soldiers.

What does this mean? In response to God's judgment of them, the people themselves were crying, *"Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off."* This vision therefore symbolized to Ezekiel (and through him to God's people) that they would arise and return to Jerusalem, their cities and their temple would be rebuilt. Then as God commanded Ezekiel to say: *"Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put my Spirit in you,*

and you shall live.”

But their life wouldn't be the same. Their true restoration would only take place when God's kingdom would come through the promised anointed One, Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. Only when the Creator Himself would take on human flesh, only when He through whom all things are made, only then would a new "spiritual" Israel arise. He would raise them by joining them to His death on the cross and to His resurrection from the grave. All this is accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit.

You know, the Holy Spirit is unfortunately often the forgotten person in the Holy Trinity. We haven't yet come to the Day of Pentecost, which is considered the one token day we focus on what He has done. But in today's Gospel we see Jesus breathing on the disciples and declaring, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Our whole lives depend on the Spirit's working. He makes every breath we take, both physically and spiritually, possible.

On the sixth day of creation, first, *"The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground."* But he was yet lifeless until, secondly, God *"breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being"* (Gn 2:7). The breath of life is the Holy Spirit Himself. By God's action, His breath brings life. Physically, you can't continue living if this breath isn't in you. But more importantly, through sin, you're also spiritually dead. You were born with spiritually dry, dry bones. You were bone dry, far, far beyond human hope of being resuscitated.

Through His Law, God, the Holy Spirit, seeks to crush your conscience so that He can revive you. Like Israel in our text, when you realize just who you really are, you cry out and confess, *"Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off."* In doing so, you join the apostle Paul in saying, *"O what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* (Rm 7:24-25a).

But how does this happen? How does what Christ accomplished through His death and resurrection become effective "for you" and "in you"? Well, you must—as Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3—you must be born again. But just as dry bones can't revive themselves, neither can you enter your mother's womb a second time. You must be spiritually reborn, for *"flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit"* (Jn 3:1-17). You can't birth ourselves; you can't will ourselves to be born, but this God wills and makes happen by His grace through His Holy Spirit.

You were reborn at the font in the waters of Baptism. Just as God demonstrated to Ezekiel that He can refashion what He's created, and just as God can revive the dead through His Breath of Life, the Holy Spirit, God breathed new life into you through His Word in the waters of Holy Baptism. Through Baptism you were saved as we learned from the Catechism, through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom for Christ's sake God poured out on you generously (Ti 3:5-8).

You are reborn and your bodies are now temples of the Holy Spirit, the Breath of Life, who dwells in you. Truly, the temple which God promised Ezekiel He would restore has been built with your very bodies. Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, our Lord and God, the giver of life. Therefore, you are a priestly people who offer sacrifices of praise through your lips and through your lives lived to God's glory through your service to others.

What Christ accomplished for you nearly 2,000 years ago would've been in vain if the Holy Spirit hadn't revealed this to you and worked this in you. The Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Father and the Son, spoke through the prophets—including the apostles. By the working of the Holy Spirit, God's revelation in Christ Jesus becomes effective in history. By the working of the Holy Spirit, you have the record of salvation, for the apostles' Words were not their own, for all Scripture is God-breathed. It is this God-breathed Word, Christ Himself, who dwells in you. Everything you have is God-breathed. Your life is God-breathed; forgiveness is God-breathed; salvation is God-breathed.

The Holy Spirit is your Breath of Life. He is your Sanctifier, entering your hearts at your Baptism, nurturing you through the Word, enabling you to understand the Gospel and to live a life filled with Christian virtues, even as by His inspiration the apostles wrote these things in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing you may have life in His name. Thus, the Church lives and moves and has its being through His gracious breath and inspiration. And without Him no one could come to Christ or believe in Him, for *"no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit"* (1Co 12:3).

Having been reborn through the power of the Holy Spirit, you are then privileged to come again and again to receive the fruits of Christ's merit through this Holy Meal, made possible by the Holy Spirit who speaks through Christ's Words and effects what they say. Through the Words of Institution this morning, dear friends and fellow "dry bones" hear

what our Lord says to you: *“Take, eat, this is My body, which is given for you.... Drink of it, all of you; this cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”*

On this wondrous Sunday of Easter, God grants each of you the renewal and restoration that only He can give. He grants it that you each may stand to the end as part of His vast, resuscitated army. He enables you all to stand in awe of the grace in which He has bestowed on you through His Holy Spirit. And He enables you all to proclaim Jesus’ death, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, until He comes again. On that day, your graves will be opened and your bodies will rise through this same Spirit, your eternal Breath of Life.

In Jesus’ name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.