

Well Beyond "Mostly Dead"
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Old Testament Lesson -- Ezekiel 37:1-14

37 ¹The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." ⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹²Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

New Testament Lesson -- John 11:1-45

11 ¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." ¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your

brother will rise again.”²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.



Three years ago, in the spring of 2008, I went on a mission trip to Washington DC with our PSA students. During our stay in our nation’s capital, we had the opportunity to visit the National Holocaust Museum. It was a powerful experience that communicated through words, pictures and artifacts the horrible scope of what was perpetrated against the people of Europe during the Second World War.

The museum bears witness to the millions of people who were murdered in the holocaust. The largest percentage were Jews, but among the others targeted by the Nazis were the Romani people, commonly known as “Gypsies,” Poles, Slavs, the mentally and physically handicapped, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, political dissidents and even dissenting pastors.¹

I saw pictures of the ovens and the chimneys. I saw a diorama of a gas chamber. I saw photographs of vast piles of bodies. But pictures and models, horrifying in their own right, can only communicate a small piece of the greater whole.

Then I turned a corner and laid out before me for 30 or 40 feet alongside the pathway... were shoes. Tens of Thousands... of shoes. Work boots, and dress shoes, women’s pumps with heels, and some that

¹ <http://fcit.usf.edu/HOLOCAUST/people/victims.htm>

were clearly children's shoes. The Nazi's had confiscated them from men, women, and children interred at the Majdanek (my-DON-ek) and Auschwitz concentration camps.

Crumpled, worn, dusty. They had begun to come apart at the seams and the leather had begun to deteriorate. These shoes had become flattened and hard the way that old leather shoes will do when their time of usefulness has passed.

And as I stood there, overwhelmed by the sight, I began to think of the places those shoes had been and the people who had worn them. Those shoes had walked to work and to school each day, sometimes in rain and snow. They had danced waltzes, and run to pick up crying children; they had carried their wearers to Synagogue and to the market; to weddings and funerals and school plays; they had traversed construction sites, jogged alongside little boys and girls learning to ride a bike for the first time and had perhaps even spent a few evenings propped up on ottomans and coffee tables after a thousand long days of work.

Every pair of those shoes represented a life lived, and the scope of the tragedy which had ultimately brought them to that place became more real for me at that moment. This field of shoes was a long, wide valley of desolation, and I passed through, but I did not pass through unchanged.

I think of that experience in the Holocaust Museum now as I read Ezekiel's vision of being led by the spirit of God through a wide Valley of filled with dry bones. The scene would have been one of total death and desolation.

These are not bodies that Ezekiel sees. Were they bodies, one might be able to hope that they were only sleeping, or unconscious and might be revived. These were bones: the remains of bodies that had died rotted and decomposed completely; these bones have been picked clean by scavengers, and left to bleach in the sun. They bear no resemblance to living, breathing people. They are completely devoid of life.

Like the shoes, by their sheer numbers these bones bear mute testimony to death and destruction on an unimaginable scale.

This valley is not a real place and what Ezekiel sees is a vision from God, but this wide valley of desolation is significant, because it represents for Ezekiel the state of his people; it stands as a symbol of the complete and utter destruction of Israel and the place of irreversible desolation in which the people find themselves.

To fully understand you have to remember where Israel was at the time of Ezekiel's vision, and where they have been.

Israel's self-identity as a nation is found in its story. It is a story that stretches back to God's promise to Abraham and Sarah of descendants as numerous as the grains of sand on a beach or the stars in the sky. It is a story of those descendants being rescued from slavery in Egypt and being delivered through the wilderness; led by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. It is a story of the parting of the Red Sea and the safe passage of the people through it; a story of God's miraculous provision in the wilderness of food and water; of the giving of laws and the merciful protection and guidance into a new home; a land promised to Abraham generations before.

It is a story of Israel's growth and prosperity. Under David and his son Solomon, Israel knew greater prosperity and greater political, military and economic power than at any other time in its history. This story was, for the people, evidence of God's power and might and superiority over all other gods, and it was evidence that as the chosen people of God, they had nothing to fear.

But then the nation split and the northern kingdom was swept away by Assyria and was never heard from again. And then nearly 2 centuries later, the remaining southern kingdom of Judea was conquered by Babylon; Jerusalem was leveled, the Temple of Solomon, the symbol of God's very presence in Judea, was desecrated and many of the people were carried away to exile in Babylon.

The story had changed. The self-identity of the chosen people had been destroyed. How could all that they had believed about their God and their relationship to their God be true if the godless Assyrians and Babylonians had seemingly been able to defeat their God and take away or destroy all that God have given them?

They had lost not only their homes and their security, they had lost their story; their sense of identity. Everything the Israelites believed about God and themselves had been turned upside down.

The Psalmist captures some sense of the hopelessness and desolation experienced by the Israelites after the final conquest of Judea:

¹By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

²On the willows there we hung up our harps.

³For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

⁴ [But] How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?²

It is in the midst of this hopelessness and desolation that God shows Ezekiel a vision of this valley of dry, dusty, and lifeless bones.

And God speaks to Ezekiel and says "Mortal, can these bones live?" I love that God calls Ezekiel "mortal." From the very beginning, God is clear what Ezekiel's role is in this vision. Ezekiel is mortal as are we, and while mortals can *cause* death and destruction and desolation, they cannot restore a scene such as this one to life as God is about to do.

And so God speaks to Ezekiel and says "Mortal, Can these bones live?"

"O God, you know," replies Ezekiel.

And then and there, amidst the lifelessness, amidst the hopelessness, amidst the valley of dry and dusty desolation, God restores life. The bones rattle and clack together, bone to bone until skeletons are formed and then they are connected by sinews and covered with muscle and skin but there is no life yet in them.

And God tells Ezekiel, "prophecy to the winds" and the winds blow and the breath of life is breathed into these newly reconstituted bodies restoring the people to life and there they stand, a nation reconstituted from the rubble.

² Psalm 137: 1-4

And God speaks again to Ezekiel saying: “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord...¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live...”

This promise of restoration and new life forms the backdrop against which our New Testament lesson is read today. We hear God speaking of opening graves and bringing the people up from their graves and restoring them to life and it’s almost impossible to NOT think about Lazarus and the story we read earlier of Jesus raising him from the dead.

It’s a story that if you grew up in the church, you’ve no doubt heard more times than you can count. It is interesting and purposeful because the author is careful to draw the story out, making sure that we understand that by the time Jesus arrives at Lazarus’ tomb, at least four days have passed.

Jewish cultural belief of the time held that after death, a person’s spirit remained in close proximity to their body for three days before finally departing. By waiting until the fourth day, Jesus addresses this belief by allowing time for Lazarus’ spirit to depart and for those in attendance to fully grasp that he is dead.

But modern science also tells us something else about the fourth day after death: the process of decomposition is well under way. We know this because forensic anthropologists actually study the way the human body decays after death. The Forensic Anthropology Center at the University of Tennessee is a 2.5 acre wooded plot where researchers allow donated cadavers to decompose under controlled conditions to study what happens to our bodies after we die. It is affectionately called “The Body Farm.”

What they have found is that almost immediately after death, the process of decomposition begins. And within 1-3 days, depending on conditions like temperature and humidity, bacteria will begin to break down cells and tissues in the body producing foul smelling gasses like hydrogen sulfide and methane.^{3 4} So when Mary warns Jesus not to open the tomb because “there is already a stench,” we know why: It’s not just that dead bodies smell bad, it’s that Lazarus’ body has begun to decompose. Reviving Lazarus is not just a matter of re-starting Lazarus’ heart, as we’ve seen on so many episodes of ER and Grey’s Anatomy. Lazarus’ body has already begun to break down

If you ever saw the movie “The Princess Bride,” you may remember that the film’s hero, Westley at one point was thought to be dead until Miracle Max discovered that he was not really dead, but “mostly dead” which mean that “if he’s mostly dead, he’s partly alive.”⁵

This however, is no trick or misunderstanding. All of the evidence, both spiritual and scientific points to the fact that Lazarus was **well beyond “mostly dead.”**

“And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live...” We remember these words of God from Ezekiel’s story and we read them alongside the story of Lazarus and they are for us a source of hope.

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decomposition>

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Putrefaction>

⁵ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093779/quotes>

Hope in the face of desolation on a national scale, and hope in the face of grief and loss on a personal scale. In these two stories, we learn that there is nothing, not even not death and desolation over which God does not wield authority.

And we are reminded not just that God has the power to bring life from preposterously bleak circumstances, but that God is willing to do so and in that we can have hope.

We find ourselves now in the season of Lent. Lent is a time when we reflect upon and repent of our own sins. The ashes we place on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, are a sign of mourning and repentance.

But Lent is also a time when we repent of the sins of the community; the things we have done and have contributed to or the things we have allowed to happen. As we reflect upon the sin and evil in the world around us, it can be hard to believe that God is actually bringing about God's kingdom. The evidence seems to point more to sin & evil taking a stranglehold on the world than to the power of God redeeming the world.

An essential tenet of John Calvin's theology is the total depravity of humanity by which he meant that nothing we do is completely without sin. That is not to say that everything we do is evil, rather that everything we do is in some degree touched by sin.⁶

Paul made a similar point in Romans noting in one place that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God⁷ while writing elsewhere of *his own* capacity to sin "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."⁸

But wait a minute; we're not completely bad people... we help people in need, and we always put canned food in the donation box for Clemson Community Care. We know we're good people because our mamas told us so. That may all be true, but Lent is not the time when we focus on what we have done right. Lent is a time for hard reflection. It is a time to examine the bones.

Where selfishness reigns; where people put their own needs above the needs of others; where Jesus' commands to love God, neighbor, and enemy are ignored whether for self-preservation or for personal gain, there is sin. And Like Ezekiel in the valley, if we are being honest, we can see that our world is literally filled by the desolation of human sin.

Where war rages in places like Libya, Ivory Coast, and Afghanistan, it is easy to see the desolation of human sin in which we exist.

Where mistrust defines our relationships with strangers; where the poor are forced to choose between medicine and food and rent; where people are marginalized because of their religion, sexual orientation, or immigration status, it is easy to see the desolation of human sin in which we exist.

⁶ Rose, Ben Lacy, T.U.L.I.P., The Five Disputed Points of Calvinism, 2nd ed. Providence House Publishers, Franklin, TN, 1996, pp 2-3

⁷ Romans 3:23

⁸ Romans 7:18-19

When we watch the news and hear as we did this week, of yet another school shooting in which 12 children were murdered in Brazil, it is easy to see the desolation of human sin in which we exist.

A dear friend of mine told me a story this week about her aunt who has been diagnosed with Leukemia. The good news is that her disease is treatable with a pill. The bad news is that she cannot afford the \$5,000.00 a month cost of the prescription and her insurance company won't cover it. When we have the power to cure disease and do not because of money, then we can see the desolation of human sin in which we exist.

And standing in the midst of this desolation, we can hear the words of God asking "Mortal, can these bones live?" Can this world so fraught with sin be redeemed? O God, you know.

Human sin is real, and it can be easy to be overwhelmed by the vastness of it. But in Jesus Christ, God has already begun acting to redeem this broken and sinful world. That God can turn this world away from evil and bend us toward God's will; that God can come into what so often seems like a desolate valley of dried bones and discarded shoes, and bring life, can seem so preposterous.

But the good news of Ezekiel and Lazarus is just that; that God brings light to the dark places and life to the dead places. In this we can be confident. In this we can hope.

And because we have hope in God's desire and ability to bring life, we can seek to be a part of that living, and we can be bearers of that life giving good news into the world.

To God be all power, glory, honor, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.