

"These Bones Live"
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
Ezekiel 37:1-10 and Acts 2:1-21
May 19, 2024 — Day of Pentecost

Mortal, can these bones live?

It's the question God poses to Ezekiel when the Spirit of the Lord sets him down in a valley that is full of dried-up bones. But, sometimes, this question rises to *our* lips, as well. It's not, usually, voiced with these exact words. In fact, it's often not spoken at all; the question just sits at the back of our minds, like a whistleblower in waiting, ready to signal that something is not quite right.

The circumstances prompting the question are different too, of course. We don't wonder if bones can live because an unpredictable wind has dropped us in the middle of a graveyard. (Thank goodness.) We wonder because we look around — or we gaze within — and we notice that things feel a little lifeless. A little listless.

You get to the end of a long week, and collapse on the couch. Tired to the bone. Not sure if you can even summon the energy to get up and go to bed. There was a crisis at work, so it's been a week of long days and late nights. Or the 5-year-old has been home sick, so you've been feverishly answering emails while stirring chicken-noodle soup. Or it's just that time of year. You're bouncing from spring concerts to sports banquets to end-of-year parties, because that's what the month of May brings. Whatever the reason, you're drained. Depleted. Running on empty. Wondering: *Can these bones live?*

Maybe the exhaustion runs deeper. Because it's not just your body that's weary. It's your soul, too. Perhaps it's been a season of transition or uncertainty or loss. Maybe you feel like you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. Or you're staring into a yawning void because you're watching a loved-one slip away, or you've had to part with something or someone precious. Maybe your heart hangs heavy because you see the suffering of the world — you see creation groaning for redemption — and you feel helpless to do anything about it. It all makes you weary. Weary to the bone. Your sighs echo the question: *Can these bones live?*

Perhaps you look around and your breath catches. Because the world has changed. And you miss the way things used to be. You miss the friend who sat at the other end of the pew every Sunday morning. Or traditions lost and forgotten during the pandemic. You yearn for the day when the Sunday School classrooms were full to the brim — alive with the energy and laughter of children. Or you grieve the days when local communities shared a common code of values and people seemed more respectful and more kind. And, you turn the question back on God: *God, can these bones live?*

I wonder if the first disciples asked this question, too. After all, when the Jewish festival of Pentecost arrived, they'd been spending days waiting, watching, perhaps weighing whether God would prove faithful.

We tend to forget the circumstances of the Pentecost that gave birth to the church, because we pick up the story mere moments before the Wind of God blows through the house. It would be easy to assume that the disciples have *only now* gathered together, as if Peter planned a Pentecost Party and the guests have just arrived. They're standing around making small talk, waiting for the cake to be cut and the fireworks to be set off.

But that's not how the story goes. It seems the disciples have actually been in that upper room for more than a week. They assembled there right after Jesus ascended into heaven. After all, it's what he told them to do: *I am sending upon you what my Father promised*, he said. *So stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high* (Luke 24:49). As he bid them 'farewell,' Jesus assured his followers that God's promise would be fulfilled. But he also said that it was not for them to know the times or seasons that God had set (Acts 1:7). So — after watching Jesus be lifted into heaven just forty days after he'd been lifted from the grave — his followers retreat to an upper room to wait. The eleven remaining disciples gather with "certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers." There are about 120 in total, all of them waiting and watching for the promise to be fulfilled (Acts 1:14-15).

I imagine these followers are tired. Bone-tired. Wrung out from the emotion of the last 50-something days. They've seen it all: Jesus hailed as "King," then arrested and beaten and crucified and buried and, then, miraculously raised from the dead. Their own feelings of excitement and hope gave way to doubt and fear, to anguish and sorrow. Joy came in the morning — Alleluia! But, then, came anticipatory grief. For Jesus' followers knew the Resurrected One could not stay with them forever.

So — I imagine — hope now mingles with uncertainty, as they wait for God's promise to be fulfilled. It's only been 10 days since the ascension but, to them, it probably feels like an eternity. Maybe they're beginning to wonder if the church the Living Lord has called into being will come to life and flourish in his absence. Perhaps they're asking in so many words: *God, can these bones live?*

Can these bones live?

And God's answer to disciples gathered in an upper room is as definitive and profound as it was to a prophet standing in a valley of dry bones. Just as wind rushed from the four corners of the earth to breathe life into long-dry bones, the wind of God fills every corner of the house and breathes life into a fledgling church.

The Spirit of God does not just fill every corner of that house in Jerusalem. It fills each and every disciple, equipping and empowering them to speak in languages not their own. Now that the

promise of God has been fulfilled, the disciples can fulfill their calling. Jesus' parting words to his friends had been: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1:8). Now, the Holy Spirit has descended as tongues of fire to rest upon each waiting witness, and it has unstopped their tongues. Now, miraculously, they have the ability to proclaim the Gospel across barriers and borders. They have the ability to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

This is a miracle, indeed. But, perhaps, the greater miracle — or, at least, the more surprising one — is this: Others are able to *hear* the good news, too. Those outside the circle of the faith — the entire crowd that gathers, drawn by the babble spilling from the house — they, too, are able to receive the good news. Parthians and Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia — they are *all* able to hear the good news in a language they can understand. By the power of the Holy Spirit, each and every person comprehends that the good news is *for them*.

It is good news for the one who is running on empty. And for the one who just buried a brother. And for the one who is battling illness. It is good news for the mother who is riddled with worry because her daughter has lost her way. And for the father who feels like he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. It is good news for the one who wants everything to change. And for the one who wants everything to remain the same. And it is good news for all of them together: For a diverse crowd hearing of God's deeds of power for the first time. And for the disciples of Jesus — who the Spirit is knitting together, bone to its bone, into the body of Christ, now animated by the breath of God. Yes, these bones can live!

Though much-anticipated, even long-awaited, the gift of the Holy Spirit is not the grand finale of God's grand plan. Quite the opposite, in fact. It's not a culmination, but a commissioning. God pours out the Spirit upon waiting disciples so that they can go forth to tell what the Holy One has done *and* what the Holy One is doing. As Peter proclaims when he addresses the crowd, God's Spirit enables children to prophesy and elders to dream dreams. The Spirit empowers the faithful to behold and claim God's vision for creation, to imagine and build a better world. So, filled as they are with the Breath of God, the living disciples of the Living Lord can now go to the ends of the earth to proclaim that God is still at work. To tell others — especially those who feel depleted or drained or dried up — that the good news is for them, that they too can receive the gift of new life.

As we celebrate on the Festival of Pentecost, God still pours out the Spirit upon waiting disciples. Her movement may be more subtle these days. I admit I've never seen the Spirit blow with the force of a rushing wind or descend from heaven as tongues of flame. But, still, she breathes new life into those who feel weary or worn, into those who wonder if these bones can live.

A colleague once shared a story about the Spirit breathing new life into a listless congregation she'd served alongside in small-town Montana.¹

This was a church that had become preoccupied — not with the *wrong* things — but with things that, ultimately, did not matter to its witness. Some among them were feeling weary and worn; others were worse off — feeling like there was no hope for the church.

But then, the Spirit empowered this community of faith to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth ... or at least to the youth of northwest Montana.

One day, a church member named Tom came to his fellow disciples with a request: "I'd like us to prepare meals for Serious JuJu," he said. "Serious *What?*" was their reply. But this community of faith stopped to listen.

Serious JuJu is a skateboard ministry, of all things. It had become a refuge for youth with no place to go after school — kids whose parents did *not* call to check on them when they hadn't turned up by midnight, kids who came from homes plagued by abuse of all kinds. Serious JuJu was a place of love and hospitality for the youth no one else seemed to want.

But, when Tom first learned about Serious JuJu, they were on the verge of closing their doors. They couldn't afford meals for all the kids who relied on this ministry for food; they couldn't afford the rent.

So Tom turned to the church, and his community of faith opened its doors to this community of skaters. They hosted them at the church once a month and let them use their parking lot to skate; then they helped Serious JuJu secure a new gathering place — a warehouse where they skate every Friday night. The church prepares a meal and breaks bread with these kids, and then sends them home with a bag of food to ensure they'll have enough to get through the weekend.

This unsuspecting community of faith became passionate about Serious JuJu; one church member quilted blankets for the kids who hop from couch to couch because they don't have a stable home; eighty-year old Presbyterian Women spent their Friday nights cheering on skaters; the elderly woman who coordinated meals for this ministry came to see Serious JuJu as her family. And — through the church's witness — kids whom no one seemed to want came to hear the good news in a language they could understand. They came to believe that the good news is for them.

The Holy Spirit swept over this church in small-town Montana — *not* in rush of wind or tongues of flame — but through a simple request from a fellow disciple. But this invitation freed this listless

¹ The Rev. Miriam Mauritzen, Ignite Presentation at 2016 NEXT Church National Gathering, <https://nextchurch.net/2016-national-gathering-ignite-miriam-mauritzen/>

community of faith from preoccupation and hopelessness, and inspired them to embrace its calling to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And, as always happens when the Spirit enables the church to behold God's vision for creation and to imagine and build a better world, others came to believe that the good news was for them, and found their lives transformed. And like on the day of Pentecost, this church found new life in its work and witness. It found an answer to the question: *Can these bones live?*

Can these bones live? Yes, they can. Friends, God's answer to us is the same as it was to a prophet standing in a valley of dry bones, and to disciples gathered in an upper room, and to the church throughout the ages: *These bones can live.* Because the Holy Spirit is still at work, filling waiting disciples with the breath of life, enabling us to hear the good news in language we can understand, commissioning us to proclaim the Gospel to the world. Yes, the same Spirit still sends out all who live as disciples of the living Lord to bear witness to what God has done and what God is doing. Even now, the Holy Spirit empowers the church to tell others — especially those who feel depleted or drained or dried up — that the good news is for them, that they too can receive the gift of new life, that — yes, yes — these bones can live.