

“You Shall Live”

“I will put my Spirit within in you, and you shall live” (Ezekiel 37:14).

Today, we begin in the valley of death. The prophet Ezekiel writes, “The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry” (Ezekiel 37:1-2). This gruesome vision of a valley filled with dusty, decomposing bones is meant to imprint an image of death and decay that we can’t easily ignore. It’s important to say this because, over the years, we have become numb to the jarring impact of this image. We see bones on skeleton costumes at Halloween or in warning labels on the bottles under the sink or in movies like “Pirates of the Caribbean” and we have become calloused to the appalling truth this image carries.

2024 marks the 30th anniversary of the terrible tribal genocide in Rwanda. The massacre began on April 6, 1994, and over the next 100 days, an estimated 800,000 Tutsi were savagely murdered by extremist Hutu militia members. In the years since this awful chapter in world history, many mass graves have



been discovered. In fact, just last month, nearly 30 years to the day after the genocide began, bone fragments were found at a construction site in southern Rwanda. This led to a large search uncovering a mass grave that held the remains of more than 1,000 people. This picture from the Associated Press displays some of the skulls discovered when the grave was unearthed. It is a disturbing image to say the least, because not only do these bones speak to the unthinkable and evil acts associated with the Rwandan genocide, but they also illustrate the grim reality of death with chilling clarity.¹

My friends, death is horrible. And the image of dry bones in our Old Testament reading should sear our hearts with a shocking reminder of the finality and hopelessness that death brings. Lifeless bones are all that is left once sin and death have had their way. And there is no future for dry bones. They are a stark and sobering reminder of life that once was but will never be again. And that is what Ezekiel saw in his vision! Lying before him was a mass grave containing an army of skeletons. For Ezekiel, it was a picture of Israel which had been destroyed because of its sinful rejection of God. But before we dismiss this detail as a meaningless historical note, you need to understand that just as it was for Israel in Ezekiel’s time, so also it is for us today. To put it very simply, when we go our own way, the only thing in our future is death. And, my friends, we have all gone our own way!

Think back to the Garden of Eden. God commanded Adam not to eat of the tree in the midst of the garden with the threat that he, “shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). But Adam did eat, and Adam did die, and, as Paul tells us, through Adam’s sin, we also have inherited his death (Romans 5:12). I’m not telling you anything you don’t know and, the truth is, we feel the results of sin each and every day, and the older we get the more poignant and personal this reality becomes. Death will touch and take every one of us and the truth is that in the end, the whole of humanity will mirror the valley of dry bones from Ezekiel’s grisly vision.

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/rwanda-genocide-mass-grave-c8e863d883609b01c783a80db6df6fd8>

But today, I'm here to tell you that this is not what God wants. In I Timothy, Paul writes, "For God desires that all would be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:4). And Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). And this is why Pentecost matters! Without the Holy Spirit, we are left in our sins and the outcome is death and separation – both here and for eternity. But where the Word of God is present, so is His Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of God goes He gives life – even in the valley of death.

During the Renaissance, it became fashionable for painters to depict the cross of Jesus planted directly above a white skull. This piece by the 15th-century artist Carlo Crivelli is one example of this curious composition. This design idea originated from a church tradition which taught that the location of the crucifixion was on the same spot where Adam's bones were buried. Now, there's absolutely no historical evidence for this claim, and yet the symbolic



nature of this legend is very significant because it proclaims that the blood of Christ brings life to Adam and to his descendants. And, throughout the years, artists included the visual detail of the blood of Jesus flowing onto the dry, decayed skull of Adam to express the promise of the Gospel that the blood of Jesus redeems us from sin and rescues us from death and restores us to life with God. And, my friends, when this promise is trusted, sinners like us have the forgiveness, life and salvation these promises of God declare. In Romans, Paul says that faith comes through hearing the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17) and this is exactly why God commanded



Ezekiel to preach to the dry bones and this is exactly why, on the day of Pentecost, Peter stood before thousands and proclaimed that the Christ was crucified and had risen, and in those words of God, the Spirit was working, and dead and dry souls were given new life!

In the vision from our text, Ezekiel preached to the bones and his words brought those bones to life. And yet, the words of Jesus do something even greater. You see, the Holy Spirit uses the words of Jesus to give eternal life. This life is given every time a person is Baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and this life is given every time the Body and Blood of Jesus are received in Communion; and this life is given every time the Good News of Christ is proclaimed – whether it's in the words of a sinful preacher or from the voice of sinful grandparent speaking Christ into the ears of a sinful child.

You see, God's Word and His Spirit are never separated! The Holy Spirit works through the Word to bring sinners to faith. That's God's promise! And just as the prophecy in Ezekiel's vision was fulfilled on that first Pentecost, it has continued today as God has proclaimed His promise to you and poured out His Spirit on you and brought Christ to you and you to Christ! And my friends, because that has happened, today you have been given life!

We can't give ourselves life any more than the disconnected and dried-out bones from Ezekiel's vision could pull themselves together and walk out of the valley. But, on this Pentecost day, the Holy Spirit – the Lord and giver of life – has accomplished the impossible. He has called us by the Gospel. He has brought us to faith in Christ Jesus. And because the blood of Jesus has covered your dry and broken bones, today you shall live. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today and all God's people say, "Amen."

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