



**"Can These Bones Live?"
Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NRSVUE)
Dr. Bill White, Jr.
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The 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. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I 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."

⁷ So 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. ⁸ I 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.

⁹ Then 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.”¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then 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.’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 when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people.¹⁴ I 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.”

I come from a family of preachers in the Methodist tradition, one of whom was a Bishop. My father was a faithful and fruitful pastor and early in my life the parsonage in Hamlet, NC was next door to the church. My mother tells me that at two years old, I would stand on an ottoman and try to re-preach my father’s sermon from earlier that Sunday morning. She has cassette tapes from when I was eight and ten years old, when I would preach a sermon in our house in Charlotte about the Valley of Dry Bones.

I was determined later in life that I would not be a preacher, because I had been a preacher’s kid (PK) and knew the struggles and sacrifices of being a preacher and pastor. I decided that I would be a doctor and

Pre-Med major. Then, after my sophomore year in college, I decided to be a lawyer and Pre-Law major. I said, **I** decided. Then after many weeks of waking up from dreams of me preaching about the Valley of Dry Bones, I knew that the Lord was calling me to preach. One Sunday morning during service at Little Rock A.M.E. Zion Church in Charlotte, where my now deceased father, The Rev. Dr. William "Bill" White, Sr., was the pastor, after he preached a sermon about the Drawing Power of Jesus, I went to the altar and accepted the call to preach.

My father preached his initial sermon on Sunday, December 18, 1960, in Kannapolis, NC, under his father, and on Sunday, December 18, 1988, almost 38 years ago, I preached my initial sermon under my dad and used this text. **"Can these bones live?"** This text captured my imagination as a child and I was fascinated by the idea and image of a valley full of bones. We find these words in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, when the prophet of God was mystically and metaphysically transported to a spiritual place and plane, where most of us would rather not go and rather not be.

He was set down in the midst of a valley that was full of bones. A valley – a place, a low place, set between two lofty mountains. A place that is often mentioned in terms of despair, hardship and hopelessness. And the Scripture says that, *"There were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. Dry bones in the valley. Dead, no life; dry, no spirit. This valley represents the spiritual state of the people of Israel, because of their exilic existence. During the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar II, Ezekiel prophesied to the people of Israel about the imminent destruction and capture of Judah.*

The people were taken into captivity. They were “cut off” from God; taken from their homeland. They had lost hope; lost their belief for a better tomorrow. Lost their ability to look *forward* to something. They could only look back and remember how good things used to be. Sound familiar? They had no zeal; no desire to see tomorrow. God seemed absent and seemed to have forgotten them. Because of this they had lost all hope in the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

These people, whom God had delivered and for whom God had provided all that they needed, dared to now lose hope and faith in God. Hasn’t God blessed us? Hasn’t God blessed you? And yet some worshipping virtually and in person have become discouraged; become distressed; become disenchanted because of our circumstances, challenges and conditions. We feel like we’re in exile and that God is not present and has forgotten us.

Our faith has become dry. **Our** hope has become dry. **Our** joy has become dry. And we stand now at the precipice of despair and God dares ask us, Can *These* Bones Live? Can These Bones *Live*? How is it that this omnipotent and omniscient God asks this mere mortal, Ezekiel, what surely must be a rhetorical question, not really expecting an answer. Mortal, can these bones live? O Lord God, You know. God, You created the heavens and the earth. You are sovereign, and You ask *me* a question like that? Surely, you already know the answer!

Church, God challenges our faith, and the faith of prophets, to see if we will be obedient to God, regardless of where we are and to see if we will stand, even in the midst of a dead and dried up situation and

preach, proclaim life. To see if we will stand in a dead and dried up world to preach and proclaim hope. To see if we will stand in a dead and dried up society and community and preach and proclaim joy. To see if we *really* believe in the promise, providence and power of God to resurrect, stand up again that which is dead, and to see if we will preach and witness, no matter how dire things look. I believe God is asking us, the church, in these turbulent times, *Can These Bones Live?* Central, *Can These Bones Live?* *These bones!* *These bones* in our homes! *These bones* in our families! *These bones* in our communities! *These bones* in our churches!

The house of Israel had lost hope, lost their belief for a better tomorrow. Their hope was dry. They were spiritually dried up. Like some folk we know. Some are dried up in various ways and need deliverance and hope. Some are dried up with alcohol, dried up with drugs, dried up with idolatry, dried up with materialistic preoccupations and consumption, dried up by worry, anxiety, and despair, dried up by jealousy and envy, dried up with hatred and malice.

God tells Ezekiel to exercise the prophetic gift of divine utterance and prophesy unto these bones. Preach! Prophesy mortal, *"Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."* It's God's Word that will restore faith. It's God's Word that will replenish hope. It's God's Word that will resurrect life.

"Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I 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."

Ezekiel was obedient to God, and prophesied, and preached to the dry bones. He preached until he heard something. That's what you have to do sometimes. You have to preach, you have to proclaim, you have to witness when it's silent until you hear something. All of a sudden, Ezekiel heard bones rattling... in the valley. He preached until he felt something. That's what you have to do sometimes. You have to preach, proclaim and witness when it's still and nothing is happening. All of a sudden, Ezekiel *felt* the ground shake beneath his feet.

Ezekiel preached until he *saw* something. Yes, he did! Sometimes you have to preach, proclaim, and witness when nothing *seems* to be happening. That's what Ezekiel did. All of a sudden, he saw bones coming together and connecting. Ezekiel said, "and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together; bone to its bone."

I would have said in my pre-med days that the tarsals, metatarsals and phalanges were connected to the tibia and fibula, the tibia and fibula to the patella, the patella to the femur, the femur to the pelvis or innominate bone, and the pelvis to the spinal cord, the spinal cord to the scapula, the scapula to the thoracic and the thoracic to the skull. But my father and my grandfather would say that the bones came together; and that the foot bone was connected to ankle bone and the ankle bone connected to the the leg bone, and the leg bone was connected to the knee bone, and the knee bone was connected to the thigh bone; the thigh bone to the hip bone; the hip bone to the backbone, the backbone to the shoulder bone; the shoulder bone to the neckbone and the neckbone to the head bone!

They had sinew. They had flesh. They had skin. But they didn't have breath and the spirit of God in them. The Lord said, preach to the winds. Preach Ezekiel, *"Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."* Ezekiel preached to the winds and breath came into them and they lived; and stood up a great army. And there stood up the whole house of Israel.

Worshippers, don't despair. Don't give up and don't give in. But hold on until *your* change comes. I've got news for you. There is **hope** in the valley; there is **joy** in the valley; there is **peace** in the valley; there is **salvation** and **deliverance** in the valley. After a while, by and by, God will **move** in the valley.

Can These Bones Live? Yes, these bones can live! Yes, they can be reconnected when they are reconnected to God. Yes, we can live when God again gives us life through the indwelling of God's Spirit. Hear the Word of the Lord!

Let the Church say, Amen!