

4 June 2006
The Feast of Pentecost

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Spirit of Life”

Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 7:37-39a; Acts 2:22-36

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Valley of Dry Bones. The prophet Ezekiel is set down in the midst of this valley, where as far as the eye can see, in every direction, there are bones. Dry bones. Dead bones.

But not just *any* bones; *whose* bones are these? God tells his prophet: **“*these bones are the whole house of Israel.*”** The whole number of God’s people. Not just His people of one time and place, but of all times and all places. The bones of Adam and Eve; Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob; Joseph, Moses, and Joshua; Hannah, Samuel, David and Solomon; Gideon, Elisha, and how many more whose names we do not know? And to them we must add *the new house of Israel, the Church*. The twelve apostles, the faithful women, the early church fathers and martyrs; the faithful of the Middle Ages, Luther, the multitude who received God’s Word and faithfully lived in their vocations. *And then also what of modern day saints?* Our parents and grandparents, those baptized in our churches, who communed with us, who have gone before us. **“*An exceedingly great army*”** Ezekiel tells us. Indeed.

But looking at this valley, what kind of God is this? Who rules over a nation of dead bones? He would seem not a very *good* God. Not a very *able* God. A *weak* God. A *beggar* God.

But then He *shows us* what kind of a God He is. A God of life. A God who does not rule a nation of dry bones, but who has loved His people enough to keep and protect their bones. *Each and every one*. There is no “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” in God’s army. He knows them all. All 206 bones from each and every one of His people, He knows. From the greatest to the least, from the biggest leg bone to the smallest inner ear bone. And so by His Word and the breath of His Spirit, with no confusion or mixture, He brings them together again. He raises them. He breathes into them. He re-creates them. For they are His.

And the Spirit, which in the beginning hovered over the face of the waters when everything was created good (Gen 1:2), now descends into the valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23) as living water, the water of life, to dry, dead bones. And there is again life. And it is again good. What sin had taken, God restores. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), but when those wages have been paid (as we have celebrated the past seven weeks of the Easter season), then death is no more. With Jesus' resurrection, death has been swallowed up in victory, and so just as His grave is empty, the valley too is empty. Death does not have the final word – life does! As Jesus lives, so too we will live.

Which is certainly good news! But if we stop there, we won't get all the good news God intended for us. For these words are about *more* than just the resurrection of the dead on the last day, **because you don't have to wait to be dead to be dry bones.**

Ezekiel was speaking this Word of God to a people whose country had just been conquered by their enemy, whose church had been bulldozed, and who had been hauled off to live in exile in Babylon – a strange land, with a strange culture, and a strange language. They were scared, they were confused, they felt like living bags of dry bones. Alive on the outside; dead on the inside. They were eating and drinking physically, but they were hungry and thirsty spiritually. . . . But it wasn't only because of their exile that they felt like dry bones. Their drying out had started before that, when they turned from God to chase after the sinful pleasures of life, the gods of the nations around them, and to seek their life and meaning and happiness in the things of this world. But instead of the life they were seeking, they got death. Instead of satisfaction, they got dried out.

And you know what that's like, because you've been there. You are maybe even there now. You've drunk the wine of sin believing its false promises, but instead of the pleasure and life the devil promised you, he just left you very dry and with a hangover. Contentment, fulfillment, life, seem so far away. Your enemies seem to have the upper hand. You've been overrun by doubt and despair. Even when you try so hard to do the right things, all it has gotten you is dried out and dead. Everything may be fine on the outside, but inside you're empty, lonely, parched. Living bags of dry bones.

And you're not alone. All those names I named before – they knew it too. There is no difference among us. (Rom 3:22) We all believe the lie. We all seek life where there is no life – whether it is in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or in success, or acceptance, or power, or sexual satisfaction, or the idolatry of thinking that my standing before God is the result of my own efforts.

Welcome to the valley. Where the harder you climb, the deeper you get. The harder you work, the drier you get. The more you try to live, the more you die.

“Son of Man, can these bones live?” Can *your* tired, old, dry bones live?

Well, the answer is **no!** Dry is dry and dead is dead – *unless* something from outside the valley enters the valley. *Something*, or *someone*. ***“On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.’ ”*** And with that Jesus is giving notice, and wants all of us living bags of dry bones to know: the One from outside the valley, the One untouched by sin and death, the One with life had come into the valley with life for the dead! With the living water of His Spirit for dry, dead bones! And so when the Son of God came down from Heaven, when Jesus began His public ministry, walking through the valley amongst the living dead, the dry bones, those looking for life in all the wrong places – what happened? *Life happened!* Wherever the Son of Man went, there wasn’t death, but life. Sinners forgiven, the diseased healed, lepers cleansed, the blind given sight, the deaf given hearing, the mute given voice, the paralyzed walking again, the demon-possessed restored, and the dead raised. As Jesus walked through the valley, those with ears to hear could hear the bones rattling and coming together. He breathed His Word of life and forgiveness, and there was life. Tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, centurions, fishermen, rebels, persecutors – no one too dead, no one too dry, no one too small, no one forgotten.

Because there is no place in this valley of the shadow of death our Saviour did not reach with His Word and Spirit of life. Wherever there is dryness, sin, and death, there He is with life. He was in the womb as we are, was born as we are, and grew as we grow. Our human nature is His human nature. He lived our life, with all its temptations and challenges, He died as we die, and was laid in our grave. He came into the valley and took all of *who* we are and *what* we are into Himself – including all of our life-stealing sin – so that on the cross, He was the dying, thirsting bag of dry bones. And looking at Him there, He seemed not a very *able* God, but a *weak* God, a *beggar* God.

But then He *showed us* what kind of a God He is! For on Easter morning, He showed us most clearly the answer to our question: ***“Son of Man, can these bones live?”*** They not only can, they do! Jesus is the only one who ever entered the valley of the shadow of death *and came out alive*. And He did so **for us**. That we who are dead might have hope in Him – the hope of the resurrection to life again, **in Him**. And not only on the last day, but already here and now. For He comes to give life to *the whole house* of Israel. The whole number of God’s people.

And so God sent His Word and Spirit to His dry, dead people through prophets like Ezekiel – who by his words pointed them to their promised Messiah, to their life, that they might have life and hope.

And He sent His Word and Spirit to His dry, dead people through apostles like Peter – who by his words pointed them to the Saviour, *Jesus the Christ whom they crucified, but whom God raised from the dead*, that they might have life and hope.

And He sends His Word and Spirit to His dry, dead people today – to you and me – that by His Word, we would be pointed to our Saviour, the source of living water, so that drinking deeply, we would have life and hope.

And through those He sends, our Saviour is still walking among us, giving life, working through His Word of life. For where His Word is, there is He.

Can you hear it? The rattling? The bones?

Every time a child or adult is baptized, the living water of God's Word and Spirit are giving life, the bones are rattling and coming together, and another life is raised from the dead. *Can you hear it?*

Every time the Word of God is proclaimed, the living water of God's Word and Spirit are giving life; dry, dead bones rattling and coming together, and living. *Can you hear it?*

Every time we repent and confess our sins, corporately or privately, and we receive the forgiveness of God, the living water of God's Word and Spirit are giving life, and our dry, dead bones raised up. *Can you hear it?*

And every time we come to this altar, where instead of drinking the wine of sin we drink the blood of our Saviour and eat His body, the living water of God's Word and Spirit are giving life, and our dry, dead bones are dry and lifeless no more, but alive in Christ.

Every time. God's Word and Spirit giving life. *Every time!* Do you hear it? No one too dead. No one too dry. No one too small. No one forgotten.

And that's what this Day, this Feast, of Pentecost, is all about. It's not about speaking in tongues, prophesying, miracles, and all of that. It's about **life**. The life of Christ Jesus risen from the dead, now given to us, through the living water of His Spirit, poured out upon the whole house of Israel. The whole number of God's people, including you and me. To give life to dry, dead bones.

So are you thirsty? ***“Come and drink! . . . And out of your heart will flow rivers of living water!”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.