

“Son of man, can these bones live?”

Sermon for Pentecost

Sermon Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14

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. ²And He led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³And He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, You know.” ⁴Then He said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶And I will lay sinews upon 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 was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸And I looked, and behold, 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, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. ¹¹Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ ¹²Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O My people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O My people. ¹⁴And I will put My Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”

When we attended a First Aid class a few weeks ago, we were told that a person who needs to be resuscitated was already dead. The job of the person giving first aid in this situation is to artificially keep the vital organs alive so that the paramedics can do whatever is necessary to revive the deceased. With this resuscitation, it is clear that the so-called “dead person” still has all the physical characteristics of a living person and as long as these characteristics are still there, there is hope that such a person can be revived. Pentecost is the birthday of the Church and many wonder if the Church is already beyond all attempts at resuscitation. According to this opinion, the Church has passed its sell-by date. It no longer has anything to say to people and hardly anyone still believes that God Himself speaks to us from our midst. When spiritual death becomes so rampant, we ask ourselves: Does it still make sense to believe? Don't our prayers just disappear into the anonymous and impersonal dark universe? And what does the Bible still have to tell us today? We ask ourselves, does the Church still have the ingredients and qualities that belong to life? In our sermon text today, we see a whole group of people who no longer had these qualities of physical existence because Ezekiel the prophet sees a whole people of dry bones. These people are not people who have been dead for a short time and where there might be hope to revive them, these people have been dead for a long time. The vultures and the lizards had already cleaned every last bit of flesh off the bones a long time ago. The sun and the wind had done the rest. So all that remained were rattling bones. Ezekiel the prophet sees all this in his spirit and recognizes the hopeless situation. For the pious Israelites, these dead bones were not only terrible because they were so definitively dead, but they were also an abomination from a religious perspective, because for every Jew, death itself was the epitome of uncleanness. So this mass of bones caused Ezekiel to shudder. It was clear to Ezekiel what all these bones pointed to – these were the people of Israel who were led into captivity. The view was of the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem, where church services were no longer possible. For many Israelites, it was clear that God had completely abandoned them and there was no turning back. This image of the people of Israel as a pile of bones also seems to me to be a fitting image for the modern people of God because the Church as the people of God resembles a spiritual disaster area. Quite apart from the multitudes who are leaving the Church, it is even more shocking that most Christians who go to church regularly and consider themselves Christians can do little with the essential beliefs of Christianity. Their belief in forgiveness through the cross of Christ and in the resurrection seems to be as dead as the bones from Ezekiel's vision! So, on the birthday of the Church, we must ask: “Is there still hope for life?”

In the midst of this hopeless situation, God asks the prophet this very question: “Do you think that these dead bones can come back to life?” It's clear to the prophet that it is humanly impossible. At the same time, however, he also recognizes that he is dealing with God, and he knows that God can bring life out of nothing. So, he leaves the whole impossible situation to God: “Lord, You know.” This simple answer from the prophet is a very strong confession and challenges us to see it the same way. God Himself is Lord

over life and death! God Himself is Lord over His Church. God alone can awaken new life through His Spirit! We modern people have now suppressed the fact that God watches over life and death. When death occurs, we blame the natural processes for death and then we say that people age, fall ill, die, and decay because nature wants it that way. Because death is so unavoidable, we accept it. Instead of asking what God has to do with it all, most people come up with this flippant sentence, which is both illogical and untrue: "When I'm in the next life, I'll do everything differently." If we look at death from God's point of view, it is definitely not natural. Death is neither willed by God nor is it accepted by God as final. To understand this, we have to start with Adam and Eve. God had warned them not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. God had said this to save them from death! But when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they didn't die immediately, but the curse of death with all its consequences came immediately. Life since the Fall has been characterized by death and the final fruit of sin is natural death. It's precisely for this reason that the people of the Old Covenant viewed death as the epitome of impurity. Seen from this perspective, we cannot understand death as something natural. It's the result of sin and it is judgment. Ezekiel also sees the bones of the dead as a direct consequence of God's judgment. Like the bones in the hot Israelite desert, the judgment seems final. But this is not the case. Judgment is not final for it is out of love that God first called human beings into existence. Since then, humans have lived before the face of God and are dependent upon His breath. And God has remained the same in His love and wanting life! He wants us to live! We are also dependent on Him speaking His Word over our dead bones so that we may live. This is impressively demonstrated to us in Ezekiel. The breath of God blows from all directions and brings life! This is all brought vividly before our eyes. At first, the bones rattle as they are rearranged. Chopped-off arms, legs, and heads find their proper bodies again and the sinews put everything back in place until finally, the flesh is added, and the people appear like normal bodies before Ezekiel's astonished eyes. But they are still not alive. They were dead bodies and had to be resuscitated! Ezekiel had to speak God's words a second time so that God's breath would breathe life into them. Only then could completely normal people suddenly stretch out, yawn, first slowly sit on their knees until they were able to stand up and walk, unsteadily at first and then at full strength.

The question is how life continued for these people after this. Likewise, we can ask how Lazarus' life continued after his physical resurrection. It can't be that these people simply picked up where they left off. Ezekiel is allowed to look into God's workshop once again. He can look far into the future and God will reveal to him the day when the graves will be opened and the dead will live again. God says, "On that day, you will know that I am your God!" All of this has already happened through Jesus and His resurrection. Through Jesus' resurrection, God finally removed the curse of death and when Peter and the others began preaching for the first time at Pentecost, God did exactly what He had prophesied through the words of Ezekiel. The speaking in tongues of the apostles was like a rattling of bones falling into place. Then the apostles were changed in their inner being – where fearful and speechless disciples first hid, thoughts and memories were straightened out and everyone was suddenly able to see themselves in a completely different light – in the light of the Spirit of God, in the light of the newborn children of God! Then the apostles began to preach. The people could hear the words of the apostles, each in their own language and as the words penetrated their hearts, things were put right that had first been put out of balance by Adam and Eve. Then the people came, in their thousands. They were baptized, they were incorporated into the living Christ who sits at the right hand of God and at the same time lives among us. These people recognized that life is not to be found where a person is given a second chance through life-prolonging measures, but that life is in Christ! This is the only reason why physical death has lost its threatening power.

Do you hear the rattling of bones? Do you hear the Word of God calling you back from the various wrong paths where you have gone astray? Come back to life! I know that many of us are sad that the church is so powerless today, but it is this powerlessness that holds promise. It has promise because God Himself stands in the background and doesn't want death. He also asks us: Do you believe that I can revive these dry bones? Because we know that God's Word has the power to awaken new life, we will tirelessly and without hesitation continue to proclaim God's words, to pass on the Word so that life is brought back together and living people rise up before us... hesitantly at first, then perhaps with a loud groan, but then with joyful praise. Amen.