

Can These Bones Live?

Based on Genesis 2:2-4, Ezekiel 37:1-14, & Matthew 28:1-10

An Easter Reflection from Toby Jones for the People of ChxUCC on 3/31/24

When we hear the word “resurrection,” I think we tend to hear it as a kind of upheaval, a complete and radical reversal of how the natural world is supposed to work. Things are born, they live, grow, thrive for a while, and then they die, never to be heard from again. We have all sorts of proof in our lives that death is definitive, simply the way all life ends. After all, we’ve all had pets die, and once they do, they’re gone; they’re not coming back, and all we are left with are memories and perhaps a few photographs. We’ve all had people who are precious and dear to us die as well, and, similarly, they, too, are gone.

So, not surprisingly, when we encounter a story like Matthew tells us in his 28th chapter of Jesus rising from the dead, coming out of his tomb alive, we – and certainly all the disciples who witnessed it back then – experience it as a complete reversal of the natural order of things. Resurrections just don’t happen, we think, and so every year when Easter rolls around, we think of it as a one-off, as this crazy aberration that God and Jesus pulled off - one and one time only - to display their unique power. And then, *our* only real role in this Easter story – as always seems to be the case with us Christians – is “belief,” to declare that we have faith that God could have done such a thing and, in Jesus, did such a thing...one time, long, long ago. That’s where *our* connection to this “unique” & “unprecedented” resurrection story begins and ends. We leave the Easter service every year feeling good about ourselves for believing it. “Yes,” we tell ourselves, “We *believe* that God could have raised Jesus from the dead 2000 years ago. We’re believers!”

And yet, we go about our lives in 2024 pretty much like everybody else in the world, for all practical purposes, completely untouched, unmoved, and unchanged by the power of this singular resurrection. We even go about our lives in these shrinking, aging, and dying churches without the slightest hint or rattle of resurrection in our dry bones. So, is this it...? Is this as good as it gets? I hope not.

That’s why this morning I want to challenge this notion that Jesus’s rising from the dead that first Easter morn was some sort of unique occurrence, standing radically apart from the natural order of things. What if resurrection is actually woven into the fabric of *all* of creation? What if death and rebirth are happening all the time in our world. Think of the cycle of sunrise and sunset that marks literally every single day in the history of creation? Can you imagine what that very first sunset and the subsequent onset of darkness must have felt like to Adam and Eve? They must have terrified— once the sun sunk below the horizon –

that the darkness would never relent. But then, twelve hours later, wonder of wonders, the sun appeared again on the eastern sky, giving Adam and Eve the living, enduring hope that darkness – when it came again - would not ever be the final word. And, before long, Adam and Eve settled into the very natural rhythm of sunrise...sunset...sunrise...sunset...death and resurrection. It's as if God wove resurrection into the most fundamental pattern of human existence.

We have a good many gardeners in this congregation. What is the natural way of all our perennial plants? Where are they right now? They're completely gone, buried, hidden under the cold, hard ground...never to return...? No. In fact, most assuredly, they *will* return in another month or so, for God has woven resurrection into the very fabric of the earth and the rhythm of human existence.

In Genesis 2, the first passage Alice read for us today, God uses the very creation of man and woman to try and teach us this resurrection rhythm, by taking dust – dried, lifeless dirt – and breathing into it the breath of life, and, as verse 7 affirms, “and the man became a living being.” New life! The breath of life breathed into something as lifeless as dirt.

And how about that wonderful, powerfully prophetic moment when God took Ezekiel, that beleaguered prophet with the nearly impossible task of keeping the people Israel believing in Yahweh, even after they had been captured and carried off as slaves into Babylon, where they would be for more than a generation. It's one thing to try and keep a nation believing and practicing in their homeland and in their own, familiar temple, but what about when the people are in exile, captivity, when they cannot see any light at the end of the tunnel. Just listen to and try to picture this amazing story again...

“The hand of the LORD... brought me out... and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?...Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD...Then there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them, and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then God said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it... Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these who are slain,

that they may live.” So, I prophesied as God commanded me, and breath entered the bones; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.”

Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel whose bones are dried up and whose hope is gone... But this is what the Sovereign LORD says: “My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and YOU WILL LIVE! And I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it!”

The story from Ezekiel 37 is a story of resurrection, is it not? Did you hear those lines in verse 11? You’ve felt like those exiled, enslaved people of Israel, right? You know what it’s like to feel your bones dried up and your hope gone. You know what it’s like to feel cut off. So, I want you to hear what God is saying to YOU this Easter day: “O my people, I am going to open YOUR graves and bring YOU up out of them. I will bring YOU back – back to life, back to connection with community, back home!” God has resurrection in mind for you too. It may be a resurrection in life or perhaps a resurrection when you die.

What happened to Jesus that first Easter morn was not a one-off! God has been weaving resurrection into the natural world and into the fabric of our human existence from the very beginning of creation – darkness to light, sunset to sunrise, exile to liberation. God is in the resurrection business, folks!

I want to share some excerpts from a couple of emails I received in the last few months. Many of you know what Mark and Heather Kage have been going through - a terrifying and harrowing journey with Mark’s cancer in the last 12 months. It began with cancer in his appendix but quickly spread to many of his spleen, gallbladder, several segments of small and large intestines, sections of his diaphragm, bladder, and stomach. He’s had many elaborate surgeries and procedures, the most elaborate of which was 11 hours in length. But listen to what Heather wrote to me toward the end of February...

“We had a great visit with the surgeon from GR recently. She was very pleased with everything. She went over the details of Mark’s latest CT scan. It looked so good that she thinks she can take Mark back to surgery to reverse the ileostomy anytime he feels ready. Meanwhile, he is back to eating small meals, drinking protein shakes, and continuing to move forward. Even his abdominal incision is looking good. Things are nearly healed. We are coming up on one full year since his initial diagnosis. Wow! We have moved mountains! Thank you for always being here for us with your prayers, kind words, and lots of love. We have

felt it every day!" What Mark and Heather have experienced is nothing short of resurrection.

I wonder how many of you have talked to Betty Wadland about what her sister Bonnie has been going through with her husband Adrian over the last 17 months. Bonnie and Adrian were vacationing down in Mexico, when Adrian suddenly and inexplicably tore his heart valve. After nearly dying down there, he was med-flighted back to the US, where he then had a massive hemorrhage, followed by pneumonia, and then kidney failure. Adrian was then unable to breathe on his own for months, was under renal dialysis, given a feeding tube, and completely unable to speak or communicate. Betty wrote in a recent email... *"There were many times we wondered if all this was worth it. Bu there was no time when Adrian wanted to give up. Adrian has taught us how precious life is. His determination is abundantly clear. My sister with her constant care and the embracing of her marital vow to love in sickness and in health has made Adrian's incredible recovery possible. Much of the road ahead is still uncertain. But the fact that Adrian and Bonnie will meet each day and new situation with love and courage is certain. We are blessed!"* What Bonnie and Adrian have experienced – and Bill and Betty along with them – is nothing short of resurrection.

So, folks, this Easter, I pray that you will stop looking at Jesus's rising from the dead as utterly unique and unprecedented. His coming back to life was never intended as a singular display of power. Rather it was intended to reveal a much deeper, common pattern in this incredible universe that Yahweh created...a universe in which darkness only lasts until the next sunrise...a universe in which when winter comes and seems to extinguish plant life, there is constant rebirth bubbling up under the rock-hard ground, just waiting to spring up when the earth softens once again. Our universe is one in which God is constantly breathing new life into our often dry, lifeless bones.

I even dare to believe the the always-resurrecting God is in the process of bringing her church back to life, as groups like this one open ourselves more and more to God's animating spirit, allowing God to breathe *new* life into places and people who have been far too dry for far too long.

This Easter, don't look at Jesus and his rising as a freaky, one-time miracle. Learn to see it in the context of an ever-loving, always-saving God who has been in the resurrection business from the very beginning of time. We've got a whole lot more to celebrate this day than Jesus coming out of that tomb 1991 years ago. Think of all the tombs you and your loved ones have walked out of over the years. Amen.