

## **Year A**

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

“De Lawd, He thought He’d make a man  
Dese bones gwine rise again  
Made ‘im outa mud an’ a han’ful o’ san  
Dese bones gwine to rise again

(Chorus)

I knowed it, indeed I knowed it, brother  
I knowed it, dese bones gwine to rise again”

So goes the well-known African American spiritual song. The consequences of God’s creation of humanity and humanity’s decision to disobey God would inevitably lead to the bones of human kind returning to the ground and drying out until only dust is left.

As I often read at a funeral committal from Psalm 103:

“For he knows of what we are made: he remembers that we are but dust. The days of man are but as grass: he flourishes like a flower of the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone: and its place will know it no more.”

Our destiny; the destiny of us all is to return to the ground from which we came. But that is not the end of the story. It is important that we don't miss what is evidently at the core of the startling prophecy of the dry bones. They don't remain as dry bones.

They come rattling together and sinew and muscle appears and finally the breath of life is breathed into them. In other words they are resurrected. “Dese bones gwine to rise again.” Throughout the history of the Christian church there has frequently been a tendency to set the human body against the human soul. In that kind of distinction the soul always wins. The body is at best relegated to a place of secondary importance or at worse, the body is reviled as being irredeemably corrupted and corrupting. A theology of a divided human: body versus soul, is a theology which is at odds with the

historic biblical witness. We need to learn to view ourselves as human beings: full stop. All of us: every part of us, in other words, body, soul and spirit. We are a unity: a person made in the image of God. If we are able to do that then we will be freed to understand the story of the dry bones and the amazing sense of liberation which we find in this story.

Remember that one of the major repercussions of the fall of humankind, described in the book of Genesis, was the expulsion of humanity from the Garden of Eden. Human beings have been in exile ever

since. We are displaced from our home and therefore are sojourners in this world. Ezekiel's prophecy was directed to the whole house of Israel. The dry bones were the exiled, displaced people of Israel, both living and dead, potentially. The promise is that with new life they are going to be brought back to the land of Israel. Their exile will come to an end and their relationship with their God and with one another will be restored. That's the promise of the dry bones' prophecy. And we'll come back to the fulfilment of that prophecy in a moment. But, first of all, what about the 'dry bones'?

times. We would be wrong to read this prophecy as time specific to Israel exiled in Babylon. It doesn't just offer a commentary on events 2,500 years ago. We live too in the time of the dry bones. We live in Adam's era under the curse and fully aware of its implications. The stark words of Psalm 103 are on my lips frequently because I am often standing at a grave side, surrounded by dry bones, and so are we all. And so the question that Ezekiel was challenged with is the same question that we are challenged with today. "Mortal, can these bones live?" In one way or another that question should

be posed at every funeral service whether it is explicitly asked or not. The question demands an answer and therefore for those who have an answer it is a perfect opportunity to share.

The home of Paul Laurence Dunbar, a noted poet, is open to the public in Dayton, Ohio. When Dunbar died, his mother left his room exactly as it was on the day of his death. At the desk of this brilliant man was his final poem, handwritten on a pad.

After his mother died, her friends discovered that Paul Laurence Dunbar's last poem had been lost forever. Because his mother had

made his room into a shrine and not moved anything, the sun had bleached the ink in which the poem was written until it was invisible. The poem was gone.

If we stay in mourning, we lose so much of life. If we cannot see beyond the dry bones our future will be confined to dust.

Let me put the question another way. “Mortal, can the bones of a crucified man live?”

In one of his lighter moments, Benjamin Franklin penned his own epitaph. He didn't profess to be a Christian, but it seems he must have been influenced by Paul's



teaching of the resurrection of the body. Here's what he wrote: The Body of B. Franklin, Print Like the Cover of an old Book Its contents torn out, And stripped of its Lettering and Guilding, Lies here, Food for Worms, But the Work shall not be wholly lost: For it will, as he believed, Appear once more In a new & more perfect Edition, Corrected and amended by the Author. The author's bones did not remain in the grave. He rose on the third day to eternal life and in so doing he fulfilled the prophecy of Ezekiel because he is to be the first of the legion who will find sinews and muscle and new breath.

The Bible holds out the great and glorious hope of a resurrection for us all. But what will the resurrected body be like? Theologian Harry Blamires offers the helpful illustration of the butterfly. As the caterpillar is to the butterfly, so our present body is to the resurrected body. There is continuity but there is also difference. Just as the caterpillar's body is suited to the realm of the ground, and the butterfly's to flight through the air, so our present bodies may be suited to this world of sin, but our resurrected bodies will be suited to the life of the Spirit, in a world that is eternal and without limit.

And just as it would be difficult for even an intelligent caterpillar to imagine what life would be like as a butterfly, so we struggle to imagine the resurrection life. It may be helpful to remember that when we think of the caterpillar we think of its life in terms of its becoming a butterfly. We define its present existence by its future. So too, our present existence is defined by the future God has for us.<sup>1</sup>

I hope you do see that all of this has a strong, forward leaning emphasis. We are on our way somewhere. We are moving from

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<sup>1</sup> Balmires H, "The Eternal Weight of Glory" Christianity Today, May 22, 1991

displacement to our true home. And it's not a return to Eden. Eden had within it the potential for displacement. That potential is removed forever in the victory and new life of Jesus Christ. "Can these bones live" this Lent? Of course, they must!