

“How Dry Are Your Bones?”

Death Valley in California is the hottest, driest, and lowest National Park in our country. In this below-sea-level basin, steady drought and record summer heat make Death Valley a land of extremes. Yet, each extreme has a striking contrast. Towering peaks are frosted with winter snow. Rare rainstorms bring vast fields of wildflowers. Lush oases harbor tiny fish and refuge for wildlife and humans. Despite its morbid name, a great diversity of life survives in Death Valley.

Death Valley was given its forbidding name by a group of pioneers lost here in the winter of 1849-1850. Even though, as far as we know, only one of the group died here, they all assumed that this valley would be their grave. They were rescued by two of their young men, William Lewis Manly and John Rogers, who had learned to be scouts. As the party climbed out of the valley over the Panamint Mountains, one of the men turned, looked back, and said “Goodbye, Death Valley.” This name, and the story of The Lost '49ers have become part of our western history.

Our Lenten journey these past few Sundays has seen our Lord bring water into the desert of an outcast Samaritan woman’s life, and bring sight and light into an outcast blind man’s darkness. Today Jesus brings life to an outcast sick person, one who died because of his illness. What we see done for one man, Lazarus, we see God doing for all the army of Israel, all who believe in His one and only Son, that they not perish but have everlasting life.

Physical death? Yes, that is a reality, not only in our world, but going back to the time of Jesus, and even to the time of the prophets before Him. Death goes all the way back to Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God and received the sentence that ‘on the day you eat of the fruit of that one tree, you shall surely die.’ Adam and Eve’s bones became very, very dry because of sin and death.

Physical death came to Lazarus. Physical death came to the countless Israelite army in that valley. Whether it was one body in the tomb that, as the King James Version so graphically portrays, now stinketh, or whether it is a multitude of parched, disconnected, and very, very dry, empty bones, death affects all humanity. Whether it is in a solitary tomb or mass grave, or anywhere in between, death occupies a space of real estate on this earth.

Jesus brings life in the midst of death, by breathing His almighty breath into those slain and calling forth the name of the dead from their tombs.

It is a hot, dusty day. The wind slowly brushes past the prophet Ezekiel's garments. Dust clings to his feet and sandals. The hand of the Lord has guided Ezekiel to this very valley, and asks him, **“Son of man, can these bones live?”**

“O Lord, You surely know.” All the prophet sees is death and decay. There is no human chance these bones could live. They're done, kaput, finis, ended. But Ezekiel would trust that God would know all things. He wasn't going to stand in the way of God's judgment on those who lived and now have died. But he wasn't going to stand in the way of changing that which now is.

“Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.’” So Ezekiel speaks as instructed by the Lord.

The toe bone connected to the heel bone,
The heel bone connected to the foot bone,
The foot bone connected to the leg bone,
The leg bone connected to the knee bone,
The knee bone connected to the thigh bone,
The thigh bone connected to the back bone, 🎵
The back bone connected to the neck bone,
The neck bone connected to the head bone,
Oh, hear the word of the Lord!

But there was no breath in them.

“Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, 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.’”

“Take away the stone,” Jesus commanded. Even with four days of decay, Jesus knows that the set of bones bearing Lazarus’ name will live. The prophecy of Ezekiel comes again to fill the hearts and minds of the believer, that God may speak once, but His Word that proceeds from His mouth will not return void, but will accomplish what He purposes.

“Lazarus, come forth.” He who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Lazarus stands as an army of one, joining the hosts of Israel as they also stood in that valley.

But could this actually be Lazarus? Did Jesus get the right body? Is he still dead? No one was going to go up and touch this body, fearing that if it were still dead, they would have become ceremonially unclean and unfit to celebrate next week’s Passover. They would not risk being unclean by a simple touch of a dead body. They stood there, watching, but anxiously and patiently waiting to see what Jesus would do if He did anything else at all.

“Unbind him and let him go.” That was the one command Jesus had to make so the people gathered would see the face of him who was dead but now lives. The grave clothes now removed, and they see Lazarus, his bones together, tissue and tendons and flesh and blood and skin functioning as before. Yet, the evangelist John reports that Lazarus’ life is in danger of being put to death again. **“When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus (John 12:9-11).**

Satan doesn't like the idea of the resurrection! He would much rather that our bones, as well as the bones of the army of Israel, as well as Jesus' bones, would all lie in a grave or in a deserted valley and be forgotten. But God would design His will to be done, even in spite of Satan. In our text, the 14 verses of Ezekiel show that for each time the word "bone" is used, some form of ru'ach' which is translated as 'spirit' or 'breath,' or 'wind' is matched up, one for one.

In holy Baptism, your spiritually blind and dead bones received the washing of that Holy Spirit, that Ru'ach Yahweh, and you became a living soul in the sight of God. Called by that Holy Spirit, you were gathered into that one, holy Christian and Apostolic Church on earth, united with Jesus Christ, and your bones join others in Christ. As one army you march forward with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, telling of His love and salvation to all who believe.

Hidden behind this scene is Satan's desire to steal and kill and destroy you. His temptations lie like the scattered bones on the floor of that valley. His threats suffocate us and shut us into the tomb of despair. His lies surround us like burial cloths. We cannot free ourselves from sin, death, or his power. Our bones are made very, very dry, with no life in them at all. We even stink of death.

Christ enters our valley and breathes life into our dead bodies. Christ commands the grave to be opened just as His grave was opened when He was raised to life by the glory of God the Father Almighty. He commanded our grave clothes to be removed, and His robe of righteousness placed upon us. This Lenten season we have a foretaste of what would come the week of Jesus' passion. Lazarus would be raised to life one week before Jesus entered Jerusalem. The army of Israel would be raised by the breath that blew salvation and life into their very, very dry bones.

Does that still happen today? We read of death in the newspapers, and as the story is told, senior citizens read the obituaries to see if their

names or their friends' names are included. If not, then they get dressed and go meet their friends for breakfast or to their doctor appointment or the hair dresser. But the reality is death surrounds us all, whether we die a peaceful death or a tragic death. We were reminded how death still claims a victim again locally when the 15 year-old Westville student was shot and killed in Michigan City. We are shocked and numbed by how death comes to anyone, especially to one of a young age by such a tragic means.

But Christ has come to take on our death by going to the cross to suffer for our sins. He took on our death and in its place, breathes life into our very, very dry bones. The Apostle Paul writes, **“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you (Romans 8:9-11).** Those are powerful life-giving words!

Does God still breathe life into His people and His Church today? Look around you. Those people are here because of that life-giving Spirit of God! What does that life-giving Spirit of God enable the individual believer, and thus joined with other believers in the one holy Christian and Apostolic Church, to do today?

We are given the certainty that our graves will be opened. We will have the Spirit of God guiding us to that Promised Land, calling us from our death valley and into our home in heaven. We will be made witnesses of that life-giving Spirit of Him who called us out of darkness and death into His marvelous light to celebrate the gifts of our baptism. He has broken death's embrace and torn away its sting. He now gives life and salvation to all who believe.

“I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believe in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” Jesus asked Martha. God so loved the world that those who believe in Jesus should never perish but have eternal life. Do you believe this? Do you say with Martha, **“I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?”** Then there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The stone from your grave has been rolled away already! Satan and Death may stuff you into the grave, but Christ calls you forth. You don’t belong in there, just as Jesus didn’t belong in His grave. If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells within you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal body through His Spirit who dwells in you. He delivers your soul from death, your eyes from tears, and your feet from stumbling. Jesus brings life in the midst of your death! He calls your very, very dry and stinky bones to life! You, too, can already say, “Good-bye, Death Valley.” Amen.