

New Life for Dry Bones
March 22, 2026
Lent 5
Ezekiel 37:1-14

The Word of the Lord from Ezekiel 37: “Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O My people.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,sermon

The nation of Israel is dead and gone. The ten northern tribes have been conquered by Assyria 150 years before, wiped from the face of the earth. Now, the southern tribes are captives in Babylon, far from the rubble that was once Jerusalem. This is how nations and peoples disappear in the ancient world. Conquered, defeated, Israel is about to join the list of the unknowns and forgotten.

Ezekiel is the prophet called by God to speak to the remnant of Israel held captive in Babylon, and one would think that it will be his job to put the nation to bed and say goodnight. All that God gave them is gone because of their own stubborn refusal to follow His Word. Their king has been deposed, their city walls have been flattened, and most horrific of all, their temple, the symbol of God’s presence, has been utterly destroyed. But in Ezekiel 37, the LORD declares to Ezekiel that He has different plans for His rebellious people – this broken remnant. Even if they have been faithless to Him, He will not forget His promises—for them or for you.

So the LORD gives Ezekiel His message by means of a vision of a valley of bones. Not just bones, but very dry bones—very dead bones that haven’t been alive for a long time. Compared to these, Lazarus in the tomb in our Gospel lesson is barely dead at all. The Lord asks Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Ezekiel says what faith says: “O Lord GOD, you know.”

The Lord does know: these bones will live again. He tells the prophet to prophesy, to speak to the bones and tell them that the Lord will make them alive once again. Those bones can’t do anything, but the Lord of life can. So Ezekiel prophesies, says what God tells him to say: and as he does, the bones rattle together, growing sinews and flesh. Soon they are whole bodies once again—a miracle in itself, but not enough. They’re still dead—they have no breath. Like Adam of old, they still need God to breathe life into them.

So God tells Ezekiel to prophesy again. The prophet does so, and breath comes into the bodies. They breathe, they live and they stand on their feet.

What does it all mean? The Lord explains the vision. He tells Ezekiel, “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.’ Therefore prophesy, 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. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And 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.”

Against all odds, Israel will continue. The people have given up hope—they believe that their nation is gone. But the LORD says differently: He will give life to the nation. He will bring the people back to their land. He will raise them as a people from death and forgotten-ness to life, to be a blessing to all people.

A few lessons to keep in mind as Good Friday and Easter are drawing near:

First, this vision is, first and foremost, about the resurrection of a nation, the return of Israel to Jerusalem, before the birth of Christ. This was fulfilled at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. It didn't happen right away, but the Lord kept His promise in His time. It wasn't just for them, but for you. The Lord had to bring Israel back so that a virgin might conceive and bear a Son, born in a little town called Bethlehem. It was necessary that Jerusalem and the temple be rebuilt, so that Jesus might enter the city triumphantly and be led outside its walls to a cross. Simply put, the Lord raised that nation from the dead in Babylon so that He might raise you from the dead for the sake of Christ.

Second, God does it all. Dry bones can't make themselves alive, and it is only the Lord who gives them life again. The people of Israel couldn't restore themselves as a people—it was the Lord who brought them back and made them a people again. So it is with you: God does it all. Ephesians 2:1 begins, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you walked"—and worse than the bones of Ezekiel's vision, you'd never been alive in the first place. But the Lord makes the dead alive! Ephesians 2 goes on:

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

This is not your own doing, but it is His. This is good, because He gets the job done for sure. The dead can't make themselves alive anyway. Even if you could, you'd always have to wonder if you really had. After all, sinners often think they're alive when they're still dead in sin. But because God makes you alive, your life in Him is certain—as certain as Christ's death on the cross for you. It is not a resurrection to a life of slavery and groveling, but a seat in the heavenly places and the immeasurable riches of His grace. It is all a gift, all for the sake of Jesus.

Third, because of Jesus, God's Word that resurrects a nation in Ezekiel is for you too—not as a nation, but as an individual. Because Christ has died for your sins and is risen again, the Lord now promises you:

I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O My people. And I will bring you into the Promised Land of heaven. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I have put My Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in heaven forever. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.

This is a greater promise, for the mighty Babylonians were powerless when compared to the grave. Even a captive in Babylon could still have some sort of life even if his nation was erased from the earth.

But death provides no such luxuries: as the wages of sin, it takes all and permits nothing. But Christ has conquered death—He has taken this greatest enemy captive. Now He says to you, “I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, because you are My people.” This is comfort for you when you face death, and it is comfort for you when it is given you to mourn those who have died in the faith. The Lord is faithful to His people. He will raise them up from their graves.

Fourth, while the Lord spoke life to the dry bones and deliverance to Israel, He did it through the prophet Ezekiel. This is profound and significant: this message is not rare or far away, but the Lord entrusts this Word to His Church and calls upon His people to proclaim it constantly. He would have this be the most commonly known news among men, this Good News called the Gospel. He calls upon His pastors to preach it publicly, constantly, but that is not all: He entrusts this news to each one of His people, that they might tell others that Christ has conquered death—that they, too, might be delivered from their graves and have eternal life. Every time people hear the Gospel, the Lord declares to them, “I have died and risen so that I might open up your grave and give you eternal life.” What a privilege: He doesn’t have to, but the Lord gives to His people—to you!—the joy of declaring His deliverance to all.

Many will reject the message, believing that it’s too good to be true, that their bones are dried up, their hope is lost and they are indeed cut off. Many Israelites in Babylon rejected the Lord’s promise when Ezekiel proclaimed it too, and many would not make the trip back when God kept His promise; but their unbelief did not make the promise any less true. So it is today: the Lord does not force this life on anyone, but His promise remains true and all who believe will be saved.

Many will ignore the message because they consider it far too common to have any real value. Sadly, proclamation of the Gospel grows rarer than people think these days as other messages replace it while sleepy Christians don’t realize. But even where the Gospel is proclaimed often, its common-ness and familiarity is no proof that it is of little value—that’s the devil’s argument. Rather, because sin and death constantly threaten, the Lord constantly assures you that you are His, that He has died and risen again to give you eternal life.

So, dear friends, I tell you this day: thus says the LORD, “For Jesus’ sake, you are My people. For Jesus’ sake, I will open your graves. For His sake, I have placed My Spirit upon you. I will raise you up,” says the LORD, “and I will place you in My kingdom of heaven. You will live forever.” In other words, “You are forgiven for all of your sins.” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.