

Dry Bones Rattling: Come Out!

September 19, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

John 11:30-44

[Intro]

So the last couple of weeks we have been delving into some passages that aren't exactly stories, *per se*, but more songs. Poems. Parables. Images. Words of encouragement for people in desperate need of encouragement. Two weeks ago we saw the Psalmist, likely an Israelite getting ready to make a long and potentially dangerous journey by foot to Jerusalem, writing a song to be sung by himself and all his travel companions, affirming their trust that God will provide shelter and protection from whatever trials, whatever dangers, whatever perils might come their way. And that when the journey seems the scariest and the most treacherous, in those moments when they wonder if they will have the strength to make it, that is precisely the moment when they will be surprised by the hand of God that has been guiding them the whole time.

Last week we read two passages, the first from the book of Isaiah, and the second from the gospel of Mark – passages about the old, and the new. Both of them, written during very different times and very different places in history, but both of them inviting us to the very same thing: to remember our stories and learn from them, but not to get bogged down in, and stuck in, the past. Because no matter what yesterday held; no matter what it is that we might be holding onto from the past – God is a God who is active and involved and working *right now*, and is constantly at work creating and re-creating, bringing about, springing forth, something brand new. Something unprecedented, that God is inviting *us* to be a part of.

And throughout history, God has driven that point home with stories. Stories like the one we started this series out with – the story of Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. A story in which God gives Ezekiel a vision, in which he was walking alone in a dark valley, and the valley was filled with nothing but death and despair. Dry, dusty, forgotten bones. Nothing but echoes of lives that once were, turned to nothingness. To hopelessness. Less than memories. But then God breathes, and his breath enters these bones, and the bones take on flesh and blood, and the spirit of God fills their restored bodies and gives them life.

“These bones are the house of Israel,” God tells Ezekiel. “Israel feels done. Finished. Dead. Hopeless. Lifeless. Like there is nothing left. But the time is coming when my Spirit will breathe upon all Israel, and life will be restored. So be ready. Because something new is coming.”

Now, it is worth remembering when we look at Ezekiel's story, that this was a vision. A dream. Ezekiel did not literally walk into a valley, and God did not literally raise a bunch

of dead bones to life. This vision that Ezekiel had was a metaphor, meant to inspire him, so that he could, in turn, inspire the Israelite people.

But here's the thing about God. God is a God of surprises. In Ezekiel's story, God is *metaphorically* bringing people back to life again. But if we read the rest of the story – and by that, I mean the rest of scripture, we see that Ezekiel's story was really just the beginning. God was just barely getting started. And as we keep reading, the story keeps getting better, and better, and better.

So for today's stop on the resurrection train we find ourselves in the middle of a story that was really very different from Ezekiel's story. Ezekiel was a prophet, in exile. A pretty wealthy and influential priest. A public figure, both among the people of Judah and among the Babylonians. When Ezekiel spoke, his words were meant to be heard far and wide, by anybody who would listen. God was using Ezekiel to speak truth to power, and to influence the masses. To give words of warning, as well as words of hope, to entire countries at a time.

In contrast, our story today is very intimate. It doesn't deal with kings and kingdoms and countries and dynasties, but with the powerful feelings of a very few people. Nobodies, really. At least, they were people whose lives wouldn't have made a lick of difference in the world at large.

Within Jesus' circle of followers, we sort-of had some different tiers of supporters. His closest friends and followers were his disciples. Those twelve guys who had given up everything – their families, their livelihoods, their careers, their homes – *everything* to follow Jesus and to learn to do exactly what he did. Throughout the gospels, we hear a lot about the disciples. I think, in a lot of ways, Jesus really thought of the disciples as extensions of himself. Those people who would carry on the work that he started, once he was gone. He poured everything of himself into the twelve.

And then, outward from there, we have other people who I think Jesus would probably classify as “very close friends.” Those who loved Jesus, deeply. Who trusted him. Who relied on him. Who placed a lot of hope in him. Who would jump any time Jesus said “jump,” but who were not prepared to give it all up to live a nomadic life. These were people who were maybe even closer to Jesus than even his own family. Those who would open their homes to him every chance they got.

And then, outward from there, were the people who liked Jesus a lot, and trusted him, and had a lot of respect for him, and maybe made every effort to be there when Jesus came into town, but they were maybe more “groupies” than they were friends. They wanted to see what Jesus was going to do next; they watched his every move; but they weren't the folks with whom Jesus was going to share his deepest hopes and longings. These were the people who Jesus healed. Those who experienced the transforming power of God's grace. Those who felt their hearts and souls stirred by him. I'd maybe

put Nicodemus, and the rich young ruler, and Zacchaeus, and the Samaritan woman at the well, in this group.

And then, there was everybody else. Those who only really knew Jesus by reputation. The crowds who would gather to see what the big hoopla was all about. Those who were intrigued, but maybe a bit distrustful. Those who would come for the show, but then would go home. Those who knew who Jesus was, but remained un-moved by him. I'd also put the Pharisees and the religious leaders into this category. Those who felt threatened by him; those who feared him, because they didn't really know him.

Today's story is about Jesus's closest friends. Maybe even the closest of his closest friends. Those who were like family to him. Three siblings: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They live in the town of Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, the mountain that sits right outside of Jerusalem. One day, his dear friend Lazarus gets sick. Very sick. And so the sisters send word to Jesus, to come. Quickly.

But Jesus doesn't really take the message all that seriously. "He's not really *that* sick," he tells the disciples. "It's not an emergency, yet." So instead of rushing straight to Bethany, he takes his sweet time. And while he is dilly dallying, Lazarus gets worse, and he dies.

So Jesus and his disciples travel to Bethany, and when they get close, we see that Mary and Martha, Lazarus's sisters, are *mad*. The kind of mad that only a close friend can be. They yell at Jesus. Blame him. "Jesus, if you had been here, Lazarus would not have died!" "He was your friend, Jesus! You should have been here! Why weren't you here? You would drop everything to cure complete strangers, but when it comes down to it, when it is your best friend who is sick, you are nowhere to be found? Don't you even care, Jesus?"

They basically raked Jesus over the coals. Saying the kinds of things that maybe they were thinking, but didn't really mean. The kinds of things that you only say when your heart is broken and when you feel like you have lost everything, and when you haven't slept at all in the last four days and there is no filter left and you just have to lash out at *somebody* because you are so tired and so sad and so disappointed and so angry, all at the same time. And more times than not, the people who are closest to us bear the brunt of all of that mess of complicated feelings.

And here is the beautiful part of this story. Jesus is taking in everything that Mary and Martha are hollering at him. All of their pain, their anger, their disappointment, their broken heartedness. Their tears, their grief, their sorrow. Jesus already knows what he is going to do next. He knows that his next move is going to be one that blows everybody's minds. He knows that even though Lazarus is dead now, he will not be an hour from now. He knows the end of the story. He knows everything that his friends do not.

But even so, as he sees the pain of his friends; as he looks at Mary as she is crumbled into a brokenhearted little ball, weeping, we see Jesus's heart breaking too. And we have here the shortest – and yet maybe one of the most profound verses in all of scripture: “Jesus wept.”

Jesus knows that the rest of the story is going to be mind-blowingly good news for his friends. And yet, in this moment his friends are still in deep pain. And Jesus enters into that pain with them, feels that pain with them, and weeps with them. He never tells them not to cry; he never tells them that everything happens for a reason; he never tells them that Lazarus is in a better place; he never even tells them that this isn't the end of the story and that everything is going to be okay. All he does is sit there with them, and cry with them. No words. No platitudes. No attempts to cheer them up. He feels their pain, and he weeps.

And then, he opens up the heavens and unleashes the full power of God. He goes to Lazarus's tomb. And he doesn't just tell the story of a vision of unnamed dead people coming back to life again. This time, he actually *brings somebody* back to life. Physically restores life. This isn't just a vision or a dream, meant to inspire. This is actually happening. God is breaking into the world. Breaking down the boundaries between earth and heaven; overcoming the chains of death that bind us. And giving us a glimpse into what is to come.

God is saying, “Yes, your grief is real. Yes, your pain is real. Yes, your hurts are valid. Yes, your fears are founded. Yes, life is hard, and that hurts. Yes, you can yell at me, and blame me, and cast all of your pain and your burdens on me, and I will bear those with you and for you. I will weep along with you. Your tears will become my tears.

“And then, I will go to your tombs and call you out. I will break the chains that bind you. I will overcome the death that seizes you. I will rattle the very bones inside of you and restore you to life.”

My friends, Lazarus was not the only person who Jesus called out of the tomb that day. Lazarus was physically dead and Jesus thumbed his nose at death, as he was so fond of doing, more than once over the course of his life. But every single person gathered there that day had at least one tomb they were stuck inside of. Tombs of grief, and of anger, and of fear. Tombs of regret, and of guilt. Tombs of doubt, of cynicism, of unbelief. Tombs made up of old grudges; of hatred; of division and divisiveness. Tombs of power and corruption; tombs of greed and dishonesty and violence; tombs that we shove other people into when we fail to treat them as the children of God that they are.

Tombs of addiction, of physical struggles, of mental health concerns, of relationship problems, of financial difficulties. Tombs of partisan politics; of wars that we keep perpetuating; of natural disasters that won't quit coming; of a pandemic that feels like it will never end.

Everybody carries something. And some people are carrying a lot. For some, the darkness of the tomb is just mildly annoying and for others, it is all-encompassing. But for all of us, Jesus's response is the same. As we cry out to God, Jesus meets us on the road. He hears our desperate cries. He feels what it is that we feel, and he weeps with us.

And then, he calls to us in a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out."

"Martha, come out."

"Mary, come out."

"Peter, James, and John, come out."

Those things that bind you? Those things that hold you back? Those things that crush you? Set them down, and come out of your tomb.

"Zacchaeus, come out."

"Nicodemus, come out."

"Samaritan woman, come out."

Set aside your grave clothes. Let me unbind you and set you free.

"Pharisees, come out."

"Princes and rulers, come out."

"Tax collectors and sinners, come out."

Darkness has lost its grip. Death has lost its sting. Come out and see the brilliance of the light.

"Melissa, come out."

[Call a couple of names]

For you are no longer dead. You are alive. So come to me, and live.