**Dry Bones**

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Can you imagine what this Sanctuary is going to look like in two weeks?

It is going to be packed full. Ushers scrambling to find spare seats for late arrivers.

The buzz of kids who had candy for breakfast.

Lilies and tulips (order forms in your bulletin).

The organ will proclaim, the choir will sing, and our voices will declare the good news.

Christ is Risen! Hallelujah!

It like the beacon of good news that beacons from the horizon. The hymns so familiar I can hear them already, off in the distance, and growing louder.

It happens every year, it comes every time. A most reliable promise. A celebration of God’s deathless love and the return of life to God’s Earth.

But this happens every year too.

With the joy glowing on the horizon, and the song’s raising up from a diminishing distance. Our pace quickens. Our stride lengthens. Our eyes raise.

Running now toward the joy of that day, we just barely notice in time to stop, stumbling, and the lip of a vast valley. Filled with bones.

I don’t know about you. But I always hit this moment in the calendar, and want to skip to the end.

Because these two weeks are marked with betrayal, abandonment, arrest, a sham trial, torture, execution, death, burial, despair. Friends flee. Tyrants rest reassured. Love made flesh is hung high to die.

Suddenly a mere two weeks to Easter feels like an impossible distance. Impassable terrain, marked as it is by suffering.

And that is where we stand this week.

On the edge of the valley of dry bones. Facing ahead toward all these next weeks will bring.

We stand with Ezekiel’s vision.

Ezekiel’s prophesy was written while his people were in exile.

And as they had walked out of their homes at the point of the sword, if they looked back they would see their holy city in flames, and the temple, where God dwelled with the people, in ruins.

And so to this devastated people, Ezekiel shared a vision:

He told them a vision of a valley, where an enormous battle had taken place, so long ago now that the bones of the death were dry, and jumbled into a vast pile that stretched as far as he could see.

A sight that anyone could see was hopeless. Death had long since prevailed.

And then God asks a ridiculous question. “Can these bones live?”

The answer it turns out is yes.

And so as Ezekiel’s vision continues, he (at God’s instruction) commands the bones to gather back together, and they do. And sinews and flesh form upon them once again, until they are restored to lifeless bodies.

Then God instructs Ezekiel to command breath to enter the bones. And it does. And they live.

So will it be with us, Ezekiel tells his people. God will put us back together again. God will bring our life back.

That’s nice. But it’s just a vision. Imagination. A dream.

In case that all seems to abstract. Let me tell you a story about a place in El Salvador called El Mozote.

In the 1980s the right-wing government of El Salvador, with training and resources from the United States, was engaged in a full-scale civil war with a left-wing guerrilla force that was entrenched in the north of the country. The campaign was unimaginably brutal.

El Mozote was once a large village. But on December 11 of 1981 the entire population of the village was killed by the military. Almost a thousand people were killed including hundreds of young children.

The tactic was called “draining the ocean.” The idea was that you could defeat the guerrilla by depriving them of supportive communities and the massacre was carried out by the Altacatl battalion of the Salvadoran Army which had recently returned from completing it’s training at Ft. Bragg in North Carolina.

I visited El Mozote in 2012.

Hardly anyone lives there anymore. The church, which was burned down, is still charred. The frame of the tower survived, and the bell still hangs over the ruin.

What few walls are left are stained by smoke and dotted with bullet holes.

There are still shell casings everywhere.

And, although this happens less and less as the years go by, for years visitors would see dry bones sticking up from the ground.

There are only two real signs that people have been there since that awful day.

First, there is a garden of flowers planted over the old school house where most of the children were killed. It is called the Garden of the Innocents. It is beautiful.

And then there is memorial. A wooden wall. Hand-painted with the names of those who died.

And over the top a plaque, with a simple inscription: "They have not died. They are with us, with you, and with all humanity.”

It echoed a sentiment that I had heard all over that country during my visit.

Like Bishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated by those same death-squads, who said in one of his last sermons. “If I am killed. I will be resurrected in the people.”

The Salvadoran people that I met, again and again, taught me a deeper meaning to resurrection.

That when people die unjustly. When violence cuts down voices demanding peace. So long as the people continue to struggle for justice and for peace. The dead live on.

If you were to bring the average Salvadoran to El Mozote, and point at the ground, and ask “Can these bones live?”

They would say. Yes. They live in us.

It is no coincidence that that is what we say about Jesus. A man who stood up for love, who made a life among outcasts, and who was killed by the state for it.

We say that death did not really hold him down. We say that he lives in each of us now. Because we continue to strive to build the world he imagined.

That is what we will celebrate in two weeks. That death does not get the last word in God’s world. That even the most awful violence cannot cut us off from love, from our yearning for justice, and peace.

Sometimes as a shorthand, we say that Easter and the resurrection is God telling us that everything is going to be OK. And there is some truth to that.

But there is a cheep way to say everything will be ok and a costly way.

The cheep way is to say that everything will be ok, because things never really got that bad to begin with. Because we have insulated and shielded ourselves from the world’s suffering, and buried our own pain so deeply that it never sticks up.

The cheep way is to pass over the horror of cross and rush to celebrate new life. But, it leads to a pallid Easter, devoid of its true joy.

The costly way is to stand with God in a Valley of Dry bones. Not just in Ezekiels imagination. Real valleys. In real places. In the real world. And our own pain. In our own real lives.

It’s another thing entirely to stand amidst all that and hear God is ask us, “Can these bones live?”

And to believe that the answer is yes.

To believe God’s promise that life can be restored.

Whenever I doubt it. I remember all those people I met in El Salvador, who survived and witnesses atrocities I can scarcely imagine, and pray I will never know. And yet they insist. God is stronger than death. And the dead live on in us.

They can hear God’s call to them. “Mortal. Prophesy. Tell these bones to live. Command the breath to return.”

They take their part in the healing of the world. They do the work of resurrection. They tell what happened. They hold the powerful to account. They struggle day, after day, after day, to make their communities and their world more just, more peaceful, more holy.

On one of my last days in El Salvador, I visited a Sunday School class in a small rural church only a few miles from El Mozote. It was so far out that the priest only came by a few times a year. The rest of the time, lay people, mostly women, lead and teach.

The elementary aged children were eager to show the American Seminary students what they knew. So they sat in a row of plastic chairs in the dirt-floored church and their teacher challenged us to ask them any question we wanted.

So I asked, “tell me what you know about Jesus.”

The first kid said he was an “amigo de los pobres” a friend of the poor.

The others nodded in agreement.

Then a young girl raised her hand, and said this through our translator:

“They killed him. Like they killed us. Like they killed the children at El Mozte. But he didn’t stay dead. And neither do we.”

Tell me. “Can these bones live?”

The answer is yes.