

"Can These Bones Live?"

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¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." ⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.
(Ezekiel 37:1-14)

"Mortal, can these bones live?"

What Ezekiel saw should have made it easy to answer that question. The hand of the Lord had borne Ezekiel up in a vision and whisked him away to a dry, dry valley. He sees a landscape littered with human skeletons -- bones that, we are told, were "very dry." These humans had clearly been dead for a long, long time. Still, Ezekiel could not bring himself to say that to God. Maybe it was great faith... maybe it was boundless optimism... maybe it was fear of what God might do if Ezekiel expressed doubt... maybe it was a little bit of all of that. Whatever it was, Ezekiel hedged his bets.

"Mortal, can these bones live?"

"O Lord God, you know."

I guess Ezekiel just didn't want to say, "I don't see it, Lord. I really doubt it, Lord. Those bones are beyond dead, Lord." Even a battered and broken Job had said to God "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."¹ But the most Ezekiel could muster was a dubious "Maybe?"

To the extent faith was involved – to the extent that the trust that Ezekiel had in God allowed him to imagine that, even here, “with God, all things are possible” – he may have thought, “Well, God already has a head start with these bones.” In Genesis, when the Lord

¹ Job 42:2.



God created the very first human, it started with a handful of dust.² Here in the valley, there was at least a framework — a skeletal structure. Dry or not, it was something... something that meant God would not be starting completely from scratch this time.

You know, people who buy and sell houses for a living will often say that a house has “good bones.” It may look awful outside and in, shingles may be missing and pipes may be leaking and floors may be buckling and paint may be peeling, but the pros can usually tell if the main structure is sound and the layout is solid. They can picture what that house could be with just a little investment, a little hard work.

I’ve actually heard that term used to describe congregations, too. “There may be a few problems here and there,” they say, “but that church has good bones.” Now, those people were not talking about the church building when they said that. They were not commenting on the specifications of the sanctuary or the structure of the education building. They were talking about the people. When they said that church had “good bones,” it meant they saw integrity and strength in the structural members of the church, the human members who had committed themselves to that ministry, people who had come to the decision that they would stand shoulder to shoulder with each other in good times and in bad to be the church of Jesus Christ together. Sure, there may be some tattered edges, some areas in need of upgrade or even wholesale renovation, but the overall structure is sound, and it is easy to envision what that house could be with just a little investment and a little hard work.

Larchmont Avenue Church has really good bones, and that is really good news for this new class of elders, deacons, and trustees who are taking up the mantle of leadership this morning. Sure, we have some work to do, but we have the privilege and blessing of building on a solid foundation of mission, outreach, and ministry not only to our members but to many beyond these walls.

In the same way, getting back to that dry valley, God at least had some good bones to work with. They were dry, but good, and that’s a start. But still, the question remains. **“Mortal, can these bones *live*?”**

I don’t know, Lord. It still takes a mighty leap of faith to imagine even good bones springing back to life. Bones are basically just scaffolding. They lack the things that really make life possible – like a circulatory system and blood to fill it... a respiratory system and air to refresh it... a digestive system and food to energize it... a nervous system to communicate and govern it all... a heart that can love... eyes that can see... a brain that can think... a spirit that can believe? If all we’ve got are bones, life is still a long way away.

The same is true of any church. We’ve got good bones, thanks be to God! The scaffolding is solid and sure, but scaffolding is only as good and useful as the good and useful work that is done upon it. We can have good structure, we can have good bones, but for the church to live – to truly live -- we need people who are present and ready to love and to serve. The church needs brains, the church needs heart, the church needs muscle. And the good news is that God is there to help us find all of that. *“I will lay sinews on you,”* the Lord says, *“and will cause flesh to come upon you.”*

Those of you who will be answering the questions of ordination and installation in a few minutes have stepped up to be hearts, minds, and muscle for the church. You are

² Genesis 2:7.

committing your energy to support the life and vitality of this congregation, and that is a beautiful, precious thing. Much of your job from this day forward will be to help others to make similar choices... to encourage more members to get active and invested in the life of this congregation – to increase what is possible on and around these good bones.

So, with a solid structure and renewed flesh laid upon it, things are looking better. But mortal, God has to ask again: **“Can these bones live?”**

OK Lord, I am certainly more optimistic. But I am still not sure, because everything we have talked about so far is human. The structure and the plan and the strength of the bones... the heart and the muscle of the flesh... this is the kind clay that we humans work with all the time. We can see a need, we can imagine a project, we can make a smart plan, and we can get out there to put hammer and nails to it. We can call volunteers to give of their time. We can raise money to fund the vision. As humans, these things are within our grasp. But these are human things, and as good as these things are, they are incomplete in the Kingdom of God. Ezekiel knew that even all of this was not enough, because, as the story is told, Ezekiel looked at the bones, and he saw the flesh, but he did not see life. *“There sinews on [the bones], and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them,”* Ezekiel said, *“but still there was no breath in them.”*

You see, it’s not really about the bones, even though they are part of it. It’s not even about the flesh, although that is a part of it, too. None of those things come to much without the part that only God can play. Only God can bring the Spirit that breathes true life into us and into the church. Fortunately for us, that is the promise. That is the Way, that is the Truth, and that is the Life that is promised. *“I will cause breath to enter you,”* God says, *“and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”*

The Hebrew word is *ruach*, which can mean “breath,” as it does in this passage. It can be translated “wind,” as it is in Genesis 1, when the wind of God blows and hovers over the surface of the waters. And it can mean “Spirit,” as it does in Psalm 51, when the poet prays *“Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.”* All three of these meanings seem to be whirling around those bones in the desert, as Ezekiel watches God’s power – God’s wind, breath, and Spirit -- breathe life into bones that had long been dead. *“Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live... and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.”*

This critical role of the Holy Spirit is the primary lesson to be learned on this day of ordination, installation, and celebration, as we once again call on the Spirit to breathe the life and vitality of God into the church. We can do all kinds of human things together. We can write mission statements, cast visions, make plans, gather people, heart, and muscle into this ministry, but without the power of the Spirit, without the breath and wind of God, those efforts will not live — at least not in the way we hope they will. Even with good bones, even with good people, even with the best of intentions, our only real hope will be for God to continue to breathe life into our mission and ministry here at LAC.

The life of Blaise Pascal can help us understand this critical point. In 1654, the French mathematician, scientist, and inventor Blaise Pascal was alone in his room. A child prodigy, he became one of the most brilliant minds of his age early in life. He was amazing at what we would call “human things.” He built one of the first mechanical calculators, a

precursor to modern computers. He developed foundational concepts in calculus and social science. He could do it all. But something was missing. By the time he was 31 years old, Pascal felt like he was running on empty. But on the night of November 23rd, 1654, from about 10:30 p.m. until 12:30 a.m., the Holy Spirit blew into Blaise Pascal's life. The only record we have of the experience is what he scrawled onto a piece of parchment in those moments, a piece of paper that was so important to him that he would sew it into the lining of his coat so it would stay near his heart for the rest of his life.³ These are the words he scrawled on that piece of paper:

*"FIRE... GOD – not the one of the philosophers or of the learned, but the GOD of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.
GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God...
Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you.
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy... Renunciation, total and sweet.
Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director!"⁴*

"Mortal, can these bones live?"

Yes, with God anything is possible. With God, even dry bones, long dead, can live. But it happens only with something that we cannot think ourselves into, plan ourselves into, or work ourselves into. It happens only when the power of God blows in to breathe life and vitality into the humble offerings we can give.

LAC, we've got good bones, and we've got good people. We've got good brains, good hearts, good spirits, and good faith. All that is left is for us to do as Ezekiel did -- to "prophesy to the breath" ... to pray to the breath and call upon the wind of God, knowing that it alone can bring life.

So, mortals, what do we say? What do we believe is possible? And what are we willing to do about it? Mortals, what do we say? ***Can these bones live?***

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/in-and-out-in-a-blaise-of-glory>

⁴ <https://churchpop.com/2016/04/19/night-fire-blaise-pascals/>