

“Still We Rise!”

*Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45
Part VI of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 29, 2020, Lent 5, dedicated to Karl Danneberger as he battles for life, to Melissa McFadden and her family as they battle COVID19, to the memory of Gina Maria Murray Harris and to her fiancé, Eddie Phipps, her sister Dayna McCrary and Dayna's entire family grieving the loss of their sister way too young, way too fast, and always to the glory of God!

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Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In 597 B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem and took many of its leaders into captivity, including the prophet Ezekiel. They were not imprisoned in Babylon. They were free to marry, free to build homes, free to plant crops

and free to worship their God. Many thrived in this environment.

But there was always a yearning to go home again - to return to the life and the land they had known before. There was always a heaviness of heart that could not be glossed over. There was always a pain that could not be filled. There was always a sadness that moved through their bodies and could be felt in their bones. And so, they refused to sing the Lord's song in a strange and foreign land. Lamenting their condition, Psalm 137:1 records: *"By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept."*

We feel like this today. We find ourselves lamenting. We find ourselves sitting down and weeping. This "new land" of our "new normal" is not our homeland. We feel like the exiles in Babylon, trying to find our way in this strange new land of COVID19. Although many of us are putting forth our best efforts, something is missing. We feel dried up inside. The loneliness is getting to many of us. The separation is real. It simply hurts. When we are not feeling our hurt, the news shows us the hurt and pain of those who have been knocked down and knocked by COVID19 - now in 192 of 195 nations and 18% of all the cases or over 124,000 in the United States.

As people of God, we know the story doesn't end here.

Although exile and separation feel ever so close, we know that God's story and God's creative energy never ends in emptiness and despair. *It simply has its beginnings there.*

God's story is a never-ending tale of resurrected hope.

God rises when others collapse and give up.

In our Hebrew scripture lesson today, God takes Ezekiel by the hand. God takes him into Death Valley - the valley of dry bones. As far as the eye can see - dry bones are strewn everywhere.

There in the Valley of Dry Bones God asks the prophet a question:

“Son of Humankind, will these bones ever live?” Ezekiel replies, “You my Lord, who reveal Your loving kindness in justice, only You know!”

God commands Ezekiel to prophesy these words to those bones: “Dry Bones, hear the Word of God! Thus, says the Lord, God, Who reveals His loving kindness in justice, spoken to these bones: Behold I will bring Spirit into you and you will live again!”

With these words of “loving kindness in justice, spoken to the bones” the bones begin to take shape again. Bone to bone, sinew to sinew, skin on skin, and finally breath and spirit and they stand upon their feet as a very, very great host!

A prophet of justice calling forth the very breath of God in the Spirit of “loving kindness in justice” brings dead bones to life - **PROOF** - that

Only God can raise the Dead!

God displays the power and presence of Resurrection Hope!

We need such voices and such poetic presence for *God's loving kindness in justice* right now. We need to listen to the poetic and prophetic voices speaking truth with love to injustice. In these pandemic times, which bring stress to everyone the extra burden of pain and stress is felt by our poor and homeless neighbors, friends, and members as the already weak safety net gives way. We cannot and must not lose sight of *God's loving kindness in justice* to care for the poor, to identify with the marginalized, to welcome the powerless, reach out to the lonely and lost, and support those who are excluded from society. We cannot forget the tears of the prophet - standing over the valley of death and prophesying deliverance. Now, more than ever, we cannot lose touch with "*the Lord, God, who reveals His loving kindness in justice.*"

If Ezekiel's story of rising to new life for is not enough for you, let's flip forward in our Bible to the Gospel of John, the 11th chapter and the raising of Lazarus. In John's Gospel, Jesus doesn't simply run to the tomb and resurrect Lazarus. Our text carries us through conversations and conversions with Mary and Martha before we get to Lazarus. Jesus is concerned about the spiritual peace, healing and the transformation of his dear friends Martha and Mary not just bodily resurrection of his dead friend, Lazarus. Once he moves through the conversations and conversions for Lazarus' sisters, Jesus collapses to his knees as the pain of his personal loss hits him. Lazarus is dead. His death finally breaks Jesus' hurt as he weeps for his friend. It is the tears

of Jesus that water the path of resurrection and hope. **His tears turn the “no” of death into the “yes” of new life.**

While God raises a valley of dry bones to new life in Ezekiel, God raises only one from death to life in John. Raising the dead can happen to many or happen to one. Communities seemingly dried up, dead and gone come back to life. Individuals seemingly dead and gone come back to life. But in both cases, raising the dead is God’s business. Overcoming death with new life is the work of God.

Let’s be honest. It is hard to conceive of a valley of dry bones coming back to life or the stinky mummified remains of a dead man walking out of his tomb. Beyond your disbelief, listen carefully - **RESURRECTION IS REAL!**

Two weeks from today, we will encounter the resurrection of Jesus - another act of God beyond belief for many of us. Easter is real too! Even if we are feeling far from Easter’s Resurrection today - hope and new life is just around the corner from the light of day!

Feeling far from resurrection is really nothing new. For each of us, there are days when we feel as far from resurrection and the reality of new life as seems humanly possible. We are wasted. We are out of energy, completely and utterly depleted. We lack for everything because we have nothing left. Each of us wonders, *“why should I get up, go out, and encounter the world around me today?”* We feel like our bones and our souls are all dried up. When we look around us and see others in a similar fix, we think

we might as well be living in a valley of dry bones. While being there by yourself is de-energizing, being in the valley with a host of others is downright depressing.

On such days and in times like these, we look around and the words of God to Ezekiel should call to us - to the depths of our souls, *“Son of Humankind, will these bones ever live?”* With Ezekiel, we can answer, *“You Lord, You who reveal your loving kindness in justice, only You know!”* It’s true. Only God knows that God can lift up what is seemingly dead and gone. Only God knows because only God is in the business of raising the dead.

It is at that point - God over the valley, Jesus outside the tomb - only God knows what to do next. In God’s creative genius, God begins to knit our bodies and souls back together. In the valley of dry bones, the potter pieces the body parts and souls back together again - bone to bone, sinews to muscles, skin to bones. And when God has done all the body building, God blows the breath of new life into the newly restored bodies and souls.

Only God can turn the “No” of death into the “Yes” of new life. Only God.

To say “Yes” to the Spirit of God, to the Breath of God, we have to say no to the valley of dry bones. We have to walk out of Death Valley. We have to find our way home to God. We have to trust that our God - who brought life to dry bones and raised Lazarus from the tomb - can bring new life to our bodies and souls.

But in these stories, God doesn't raise the dead all alone. God works with God's special agents to make this happen. God has Ezekiel and God has Jesus on the front lines. And this is where we come in. If we are receptive to the God's Spirit, God will use us in his Resurrection Business Plan. We have to be open to be special agents of new life!

In my lifetime, I have witnessed resurrection time and time again. I have seen and I have felt the power of God bringing new life to you and to me. I have seen you rise from the valley of the shadow of death to walk again. I have seen some of you written off for dead and you have risen.

This very morning, God is working wonders over at Ohio State University as Dr Karl Danneberger is being weaned from his ventilator in his battle against COVID19. Karl and Sallie have been active members of our church for 20 years. They raised their sons Marc and Kyle here and they were confirmed here. With the power of love, medicine and prayers, Karl will rise again. He will make a comeback. I believe this with all my heart. The doctors, nurses, his family, our church family of faith and thousands of others are surrounding him with hope and prayers today. Pray for his rising! Pray for his healing.

Like Karl, there are others we need to pray for today with COVID19 - our dear friend Robyn Petras, my friend, Lt. Melissa McFadden and her four family members and all testing positive for COVID19 here in Columbus, across Ohio and across the world. And we lift a special prayer for our own Deacon, Dayna

McCrary and her family as her sister Gina was taken from this world by COVID19 two before her 54th birthday.

We have to believe in rising to new life. We have to believe that we will rise through these times. We have to become God's special agents in the work of raising the dead - beginning with the death we see in ourselves, in our attitudes, in our bad habits, our unforgiving words that hurt and separate, our hearts which we allow us to stay broken and thus wound others. We have to rise above the things that keep us apart.

In her poem, "*And Still I Rise*," poet laureate Maya Angelou offers a powerful witness of rising through the hatred and abuse of racism and discrimination. Her poem ends with these words:

Out of the butts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

*Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.*

I rise

I rise

I rise.

In the Spirit of Maya. In the spirit of God, we proclaim:

WE Rise. WE Rise. Still - WE Rise. Amen.

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