“Sabbath as Homecoming”
(6 of 9 in the sermon series, “Sabbath, The Seventh Day of Rest”)

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent V, April 6, 2014, dedicated to the memory of John Siddall who passed away 3/24 and Sam Gordon who passed away 3/31 and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: 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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Years ago, our denomination had a series of ad campaign posters - one of which read, “If you think it is hard to get up for church on Sunday, try rising from the dead. If you don’t believe us, Just ask Jesus. Come join us for worship. The United Church of Christ.” How true!

While some of us are yawning, moaning, even snoring this morning as we sit in the house of the Lord, our Savior is busy raising the dead in the Gospel of John. And in Ezekiel, God is busy putting bodies and souls back together in a valley of dry bones. Two weeks from today, all our texts in word and music will be tuned to resurrection with the volume turned way up! I hope it true that none of us will be sleeping in our overnight tombs on Easter morning!

Raising the dead is God’s business. But, in our times, we have given the tales and the tasks of raising the dead to the dead themselves. Zombies, Vampires and Hunters in search of Ghosts lead the way. TV shows, books, films and ghost tours make “Raising the Dead” a multibillion dollar business! The Twilight film series alone grossed $3.3 billion at the box office a few years ago. Clearly, raising the dead in the 21st Century is big business’ business. The driving force of this death defying business is the mystery and audacity of the dead to not stay dead.

Overcoming death is actually the work of God. It is also the work of God’s Sabbath. Sabbath is all about saying “No” to the things that drain us and will
eventually kill us. It is about saying “Yes” to the things that sustain us and give us life. Sabbath is about Homecoming. Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal of Zlotchov writes of Sabbath, "Sabbath means the homecoming. On that day, all returns to its true place... on the Sabbath day, all find rest because they are allowed to go home."

Dawn J. Lipthrott picks up this theme in Shabbat: A Taste of Wholeness:

“Shabbat (or Sabbath) is a day of reconnecting with the essence of Life, and being 'held' by the Divine, it is the day of coming home -- to yourself, and to your inherent connection with all Creation and with God. It is when you return to your true place and nature which is harmony, wholeness, and peace. According to Jewish mystical tradition, it is also the day in which the Sefirot (Attributes) through which all is created, return to their proper place and relationship.* All is in balance and harmony, allowing the Divine flow to abundantly enter the world. Shabbat is a time when the Light of the beginning of Creation is revealed again in your world. It is a taste of the 'world to come' -- to nourish you and to challenge you to co-create a world that is the essence of Shabbat.

(Furthermore) Because Shabbat is a celebration of Creation, you do everything on Shabbat 'as if for the first time.' You see everything in the first Light of Creation. On each and every Shabbat you say the prayers and sing the songs with the excitement of the first time. You eat challah and drink wine 'as if for the first time.' You eat your meal and enjoy the flames of the candles 'as if for the first time.' You see each other 'as if for the first time.' You approach every moment as brand new -- and in so doing, you come closer to the reality of experience. The rabbis warned about 'growing old' in our seeing, thinking, and experiencing.

Shabbat breaks open life to reveal its eternal newness in each and every moment. Shabbat reminds you to see the Divine in the everyday. With the eyes of Shabbat, the true nature of Creation is revealed. (we must remember) that Creation did not happen just one time, but that at every moment, God continues to create all things in order for it to exist. At each moment all things are new and Shabbat gives you practice in experiencing each moment with fresh wonder and awareness.

There are days in our lives when we feel as far away from this experience and reality of new life as seems possible. We are wasted -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?” We
feel like our bones and our souls are all dried up. When we add others to this mix, when we look around us and see others in similar situations, 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 occasions, we look around and the words of God to Ezekiel resonate in the depths of our souls, “Mortal, can these bones live?” With Ezekiel, we can answer, “Lord God, only you know that.” God knows that only God knows if dry bones can live again.

When we are all dried out, burned out, wasted and depleted, it is time for Sabbath. It is time to return to God. It is time to go home to God. Then and only then, God begins to knit our bodies and souls back together. In the valley of dry bones, God knits bodies and souls together - bone to bone, sinews to muscles, skin on bones. Finally, when the power of God has done all the body building, God blows the breath of new life into the newly restored bodies and souls.

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 can bring life to dry bones and raise the dead – as God did with Lazarus – can bring new life to our bodies and souls.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus didn’t simply run to the tomb and resurrect Lazarus. Our text carries us through conversations, confrontations and conversations with Mary, Martha, and a host of others before Lazarus walks out of the darkened tomb into the light of day. Jesus raises his dead friend only after he weeps for him. His tears water the path of resurrection and hope. His tears turn the “no” of death into a “yes” of new life.

I believe our task today and throughout this week is be about 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 to stay broken and thus wound others.

Our Sabbath work this week is one of homecoming. We need to forgive those who seem unforgiveable in our lives. We need to weep for those who for whom we have not shed one tear of compassion in recent days or years.
We need say: “Yes” to the goodness of creation. “Yes” to the belovedness of its messy, inconvenient creatures. “Yes” to doubting, moody, whiny prophets. “Yes” to poetry and love songs. “Yes” to our children and grandchildren. “Yes” to the blessing of the poor, the weak, and the lowly. “Yes” to the cross and the resurrection. “Yes” even to our “no’s.”

As we say “Come out” to the dead parts of our lives and attitudes; “come out” to the puss we have allowed to fester in the wounds of our heart, “Come out” to old beliefs about ourselves and others, “Come out” to pain we carry and the pain we cause – Jesus words “unbind him!” and “Unbind her!” will bring resurrection life our weary bones and souls. Only God knows that we can do this. Only we know if we will do it. May you experience Sabbath as Homecoming this today and throughout this week. Amen.

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