

2013_04_06 Passion 5
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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The Spirit Resurrects a People who Respond: I BELIEVE

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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Grace and peace be multiplied to you in Christ Jesus who is Your Resurrection and Your Life. Amen.

In His name, dear fellow redeemed,

We live in a season of anticipation. Easter is just around the corner. The Passion season is a season of anticipation; a time of waiting where we recognize and confess that we are still not there yet. But really this is not just a season, this is the life of the Christian. Our life as Christians is a time of anticipation. And because we live in anticipation for what is coming; it is a season of faith.

But how long can we wait? How long can we wait while sin has its way; while it comes to slay us and leave us in a valley of dry bones. And a mother struck by tragedy – how long can she wait?

She bends down to slip on her shoes. She puts them on slowly and thoughtfully. She was getting ready to go to church when she saw his picture in the hallway. She remembers when she would tie his shoes for church. But now he's gone. It has been three years since her son was taken from her in the motorcycle accident. He was 29. And it was not just her son who died that day in April. It was a mother who died. No one else will feel what she has felt. In the grief that only a mother could know, life seemed to be taken from her. She looks up at his picture and remembers that feeling: how she wondered if she could ever hope again, ever believe again; it was as if she was walking about in a valley of dry bones.

Before we lose all hope, before we commit this mother to the grave, God must speak. He must speak, for He will not allow His name to be forgotten; He will speak, for His Word is how He has chosen to accomplish what He pleases and bestow His Spirit upon those slain by sin. He says, "By this they will know Me." He is poised, in the midst of hopelessness to make Himself known.

This text is about anticipation and faith. And faith is the work of the Spirit. In other words this text is about the Third Article to the Apostles' Creed. As we wait for Easter, this is the Spirit's work: to create faith and resurrect a people who respond: "I believe."

So here we are – gathered in vision of bones: we open our eyes to this word, and our ears to this sight, and we wonder what God in His almighty power and eternal grace will do with a hopeless situation. We walk within the mind of God today. We walk with Ezekiel into a prophet's vision. May the Spirit breathe and may we respond: I believe.

Ezekiel 37:1–14

The hand of the Lord came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. ² Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. ³ And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

So I answered, "O Lord God, You know."

⁴ Again He said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! ⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: "Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord." ' "

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Also He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord God: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ' " ¹⁰ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹ Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!' ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: "Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. ¹⁴ I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it," says the Lord.' "

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray, O LORD God, breath into us the breath of life that we may believe in Your Son as the Resurrection to eternal life. Amen.

The Spirit Resurrects a People who Respond:

I BELIEVE

- ... in the Holy Spirit
- ... the Holy Christian Church,
the communion of saints
- ... the forgiveness of sins
- ... the resurrection of the body
and the life everlasting

I BELIEVE ... in the Holy Spirit

A great battle – or even more so, ambush, a slaughter – has left Israel dead. They have lost hope, faith, and despair of life itself. They have been slain by sin. Death is more than the last breath of air a person takes. Idolatry had left them for dead, with no source of life; nothing but statue and stone. This death was spiritual; it was unbelief which had cut themselves off from God’s loving covenant; and so cut they were cut off from His Word and from His Spirit and from the only source of life. The LORD gave them over to what they desire; they are forfeited into the hands of the enemy and they taken captive to other gods and other nations. All that remained was the remnants of a battle lost.

Have you ever known anyone who is dead while still living? Sin defeats us and leaves us in a valley of dry bones. It begins at our conception. We die with Adam. Sin is more than a defect to be fixed, or a mistake to be corrected, or a bad choice from which we learn to do better. Sin is the remnant of a battle long since lost.

Apart from God’s Spirit, there is no breathe, there is no life, there is no hope. From the very beginning, the work of the Spirit has been to give life. In Genesis 3, God breathes into Adam the breathe of life and so he becomes a living being. And Job writes: it is “the Spirit of God has made me, And the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4). Apart from God’s Spirit, there is no life; for no one can know the Author and Source of Life apart from the gift of His Spirit. And there is no Spirit, apart from God’s Word and verbal promise.

So Luther writes about the Apostles’ Creed, “Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit.”

It would require a resurrection. And it would happen at the Word of the Lord through His prophet. His name will be known and it will be known by the power of His Word. He will prove Himself as the Resurrection and the Life. And then His people will respond: "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

I BELIEVE ... in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.

And so God speaks. He commands Ezekiel to prophesy. And He commands life. He does it by sending His Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God who imparts life to each of us. And He does so by gathering us into the community where His voice speaks and is heard. Israel will be raised up and they will live. The Spirit raises up a people who respond: "I believe."

10 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.

He raises up His Church, a vast army who are filled with faith and hope. And He does so with nothing more than a Word. He speaks, He breathes and the battle once lost is won.

As we confess in Luther's explanation to the third article: "the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified, and kept me in true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

The Spirit resurrects a people who respond with the words of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints."

I BELIEVE ... in the forgiveness of sins.

Israel had no hope. They were cut off from God. They had no access to Him as the source of life. Sin had separated them, even as it separates us from God. The only way to reunite with our holy God and eternal life is to be forgiven. And the only way to be forgiven is to have the sins removed. And the only way to have the sins removed is through the condemnation against us: eternal death in hell.

So God would make Himself known in this. He would die for His people. One man would die eternal death for all. This king, rides on a donkey, ironically humbled in defeat, He submits to the cross. All about Him are dry bones; the remnants of a battle

long since lost. Only He, the Son of God, could change this. And He would do it in death.

Romans 8:3 For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh.

He was slain for us, on account of our sins; because we could never resurrect our sinful flesh, Jesus must be sin for us and so also become our resurrection. He becomes Israel, cut off from the Father, and forsaken. And through His perfect life and innocent death, He satisfies the just condemnation against us. Death cannot hold Him. He is raised because we are forgiven.

There He stands in the Church which is His body. He stands, flesh and blood, joints and marrow, the living Christ. And where He stands, forgiveness stands, and we stand victorious.

The Spirit daily and richly forgives sin to me and all believers. And He does it where Christ's stands and where Christ is living: the Church. Daily and richly the Church bestows His Word, the proclamation of the gospel; and daily and richly the Spirit bestows forgiveness. His prophet speaks, and God breathes through the Word: forgiveness – He does so privately through private confession and absolution, and also publicly through baptism, absolution, and the Lord's Supper. This is the Spirit's work of resurrection: through the Church, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins. In this good news of Christ, He resurrects a people who respond: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

I BELIEVE ... in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

It is all about anticipation and faith. Easter is just around the corner, and we are waiting. We are waiting for the resurrection. How long can we wait?

They had waited four days. Lazarus became ill some time ago and now it has been four days now since his death. He's already in the tomb when Jesus finally arrives. What reason is there for Jesus to come now. Surely a stench has already begun. Why would Jesus not have come sooner? He could have done something. He has power over sickness, why would He delay? Lazarus was Martha and Mary's brother and a close friend of Jesus; and now he is dead.

All that's left is the remnants of what sin has done; the remnants of a battle long since lost. Martha rightly grieves. Her brother is dead, and it seems Jesus has done nothing to help. She knows he will rise again on the last day. But for now he is still dead.

We live in a season of anticipation. We live in a time of faith. We are waiting for God to restore what has gone wrong. But in the mean time, we must face the battles, this army, gathered together in Christ, we face sin and death. And we could never do so apart from God's Spirit.

God will have the last word. He speaks. He must speak, for the Word is the means by which He breathes His Spirit. He says, "By this they will know me ... when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves... I will put My Spirit in you and you shall live."

He speaks, and there, standing before us, is the Resurrection and the Life. Jesus is a living prophecy who walks among us. And He says: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25–26)

Faith in the resurrection is to live now. Whoever lives and believes in Him, lives today. The Spirit resurrects us by bringing us into the living presence of our Savior – where we hear His word and receive His body and blood. Here He stands before us, with all power over sin and death and breathing His Spirit into hopeless hearts.

And it took just two words: "Lazarus, come forth." He has the keys to hades and to death, and by His word He releases us from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. We anticipate that same restoration for each of us. He will come again and with a word of His mouth, we come forward – flesh and blood, bones covered in living glory. And we confess in the creed that Easter is just around the corner by saying: "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

There is life, there is hope, even for a mother who grieves. She finishes tying her shoes and stands up. It has been three years now since his death, but she's no longer afraid to look at his picture. She looks up at his picture and remembers that feeling: how she wondered if she could ever hope again, ever believe again. But she knows that Easter is just around the corner. It is April again, two years since his death. And April is a season of new life. She recalls those words of Jesus read at his funeral: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." Yes, she thinks. She believes this.

She heads out the door with those words and that picture on her mind. You see, she looks at his picture every time she leaves for church. Because she knows that when she gets there, he will be there. She knows that Jesus will be there, which means His Spirit will be there, which means the communion of saints will be there; which means there, at the Lord's Table today, together with His body and blood will be her Dillin. The picture of his face is fresh in her mind, so fresh that as she sits down and looks up to the communion ware on the altar, it is as if she can almost see him, there together with Jesus, smiling dimples and all. So she responds: "I believe in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

Amen.