

## **Sermon**

### ***Faith in the Face of Grief***

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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There are moments in life when we look around and all we can see is what's missing. The empty chair. The silence where a voice used to be. The future that will not unfold the way we imagined. Grief has a way of convincing us that the story is over.

Our encounter today begins in a place that feels almost like the opening of a horror movie. Ezekiel is led into a valley full of bones. Picture it: a dry, hot desert, scattered with remains of unknown origin. It is unmistakably a place of death, of endings. And God doesn't simply point it out from a safe distance—God brings Ezekiel *into* it. Into the heat, the sand, the silence. Into a landscape where nothing looks alive. And there, surrounded by what feels utterly hopeless, God invites Ezekiel to face the truth.

God doesn't ask for optimism. God asks for faith—faith that doesn't deny death, but trusts God's capacity to create life where life seems impossible.

Then comes the question: "Mortal, can these bones live?"

If this were a campfire story, this is where I'd hold a flashlight under my chin. Because suddenly Ezekiel hears something—a sound, a rattling. The bones begin to move. They come together. And scripture tells us: "I 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."

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Inspired by [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org) commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14 by Rev Collin Cornell and John 11:1-45 by Rev Laura Holmes.

At this point, they're basically zombies surrounding Ezekiel. And God says, "Prophesy to the breath... breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

I imagine Ezekiel thinking, "Alright, alright—I'm doing it!" And as he speaks, breath enters them. They stand on their feet. A vast multitude.

Then God reveals the meaning: these bones are the people of Israel—beaten down, exiled, exhausted. And God promises to bring life back into them, to restore them, to give them a home again.

Have we ever been so lost in our own grief, so disoriented by life's twists and turns, that we feel like those bones in the desert? Or maybe more like the zombie phase—moving through our days with bodies intact but breathless, directionless, unsure of what comes next?

It's a dramatic image, but in a world that feels increasingly unpredictable and unstable, many people know exactly what that kind of numbness feels like. And more deeply, whenever we lose what we call "home"—when someone dies, when a relationship ends, when someone leaves—we walk through our own valley of dry bones.

The question is: how long do we stay there? And can we trust that even in that valley, God is already preparing what comes next?

If Ezekiel shows us a valley where hope seems impossible, John's Gospel brings us into a home where hope feels too late.

Mary and Martha aren't standing in a desert, but they are standing in their own valley of dry bones. Their brother is gone. Their friend—Jesus—didn't arrive in time. And the air in that house must have felt thick with the same questions we ask

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when life breaks our hearts: *Where were you? Why didn't things turn out differently? How do we go on now?*

What I love about this story is how honest it is. Martha meets Jesus on the road and says exactly what she's thinking: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It's not disrespect. It's grief speaking truth.

And Jesus doesn't correct her. He doesn't tell her to calm down or have more faith. He meets her right in that raw, aching place.

Mary comes later, falls at his feet, and says the same words. And Jesus doesn't rush past her pain either. He weeps with her. The Son of God stands at a tomb and cries.

If Ezekiel's valley shows us that God is not afraid of death, Bethany shows us that God is not afraid of our grief.

And then, just as God asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Jesus asks Martha a question of his own: "Do you believe...?" Not "Do you understand?" Not "Are you okay now?" But "Do you trust that this is not the end?"

Because faith in the face of grief isn't about pretending everything is fine. It's about trusting that God is still moving, still breathing, still calling life out of places we've already labeled as lost.

And then Jesus does something that echoes the valley of dry bones. He stands before a tomb—another place of endings—and speaks a word of life. "Lazarus, come out."

Where Ezekiel heard rattling bones, the people of Bethany hear shuffling footsteps. Where Ezekiel watched breath enter lifeless bodies, Mary and Martha watch their brother walk back into the light.

Two stories, one truth: **God meets us in the valley, in the tomb, in the places where we feel most abandoned—and breathes life again.**

Ezekiel's valley and Mary and Martha's grief may feel like ancient stories, but they speak into the very real valleys we walk through now. Because the truth is: we all have places in our lives that feel like dry bones. We all have moments when hope feels late, or lost, or simply too heavy to carry.

Some of us know what it is to stand in a valley where something precious has ended. Some of us know what it is to sit beside a tomb—literal or metaphorical—and wonder how we're supposed to move forward. Some of us know what it is to feel like we're going through the motions, breathing but not really alive.

And these stories remind us of something essential: **God does not wait for us to climb out of the valley. God meets us in it.**

God meets Ezekiel in the desert. Jesus meets Mary and Martha in their grief. And God meets us—right where we are, not where we think we should be.

Both stories show a God who steps into places we would rather avoid:

- the valley of dry bones
- the house filled with mourning
- the tomb sealed shut

And in each place, God asks a question that echoes through time: **“Do you believe life can come from this?”**

Not because God needs reassurance, but because *we* do. Because when we’re grieving, it’s easy to believe the valley is all there is. It’s easy to believe the tomb is the end of the story.

But God sees what we cannot yet see. God imagines what we cannot yet imagine. God breathes where we cannot yet breathe.

And that’s where these stories touch our lives today.

Because grief—whether it comes from death, or loss, or change, or disappointment—has a way of narrowing our vision. It convinces us that nothing new can grow. It tells us the future is closed off. It whispers that we are stuck.

But the God of Ezekiel and the God of Bethany is a God who refuses to let death have the final word.

This doesn’t mean the valley disappears. It doesn’t mean the tomb never existed. It doesn’t mean our grief is wrong or faithless.

It means that **God is already working in places we have written off**. It means that **God is breathing even when we feel breathless**. It means that **life—real life—can rise again**.

So the question for us becomes:

Where are the dry bones in our lives? Where are the places we’ve stopped expecting anything to change? Where are the tombs we’ve sealed shut because we can’t bear to look inside?

And can we trust—just enough—that God is not finished?

Because faith in the face of grief isn't about pretending we're fine. It's about believing that God is still speaking, still calling, still breathing life into places we thought were beyond hope.

So I want to invite us, gently, to look at our own lives through the lens of these stories. Not to judge ourselves, not to rush ourselves, but simply to notice. Amen