

"Can these bones live?" (Ezekiel 37:3) When this question is spoken over your grave as the dirt thunders down on your casket, and as your grave is covered in grass and adorned with flowers, what will the answer be? When they ask "Can these bones live?" what will the people say?

Perhaps the question is not asked of you in your death at a good old age, but rather of a young man, 25 or so, just coming out of college. He had everything going for him, a good job and a Christian, Lutheran even, girlfriend when cancer comes and takes his life. What if like Lazarus, he was loved by Christ and a strong member of the church? "Can these bones live?" the people would ask over his grave. How can his bones live once more?

Jesus kneels before the tomb of Lazarus. Martha, Mary and the Jews around them mourn over Lazarus who lays in the tomb, now four days dead. They doubt Jesus can raise this dead man. They lack faith for they have answered the question by saying, "No these bones cannot live any longer."

The question originally comes as Ezekiel stands over a valley full of very dry bones and God asks him, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel answers, "O Lord God, You know." (Ezekiel 37:3) These bones the text says are very dry. They have not laid in a tomb for merely four days. They have finished the ripening and rotting stage. They no longer possess their once fetid stench. "Can these long-dead bones still live?"

In a sense, God also asked us this question prior, He said, "Can these bones live?" Prior to your Baptism, you were dead in her trespasses and sins. Despite all appearances to the contrary, there was no life in you. You were born in sin and in need of your savior. You are born just like everyone of us here today, blind, dead and enemies of God. We were like the dry bones in the valley and the four day rotting stench of Lazarus. Even though we had all the appearances of being alive, yet were we dead just like them.

We ask the same question about the culture around us. "Can these bones live?" Our culture denies the death in which it wallows. Our culture refuses to recognize sin and evil, and when death is most obvious because the body of a loved lies in a casket, our culture still try to deny it. It covers death up with makeup or cremates it and turns it to ashes. Our culture embalms death so that it looks so natural and normal, almost as though the person never died.

Yet while our culture denies death, it also wallows in it. Our culture which murders its unborn children, euthanizes its dying elders, wantonly murders in the street. In many ways, our culture is the epitome of dead, dry, lifeless bones. "Can these bones live?"

Ironically, our culture which denies death with makeup and embalming may not be as far off the mark as we might suppose. Jesus says in our Gospel today, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." (John 11:11) For the believer in Christ, death is nothing more than sleep. The lifeless bones of the Christian will be awoken in new life on the last day. The bones of the unbeliever also will be awoken, but not in joy. These bones will experience an eternal death, an eternal suffering apart from Jesus and apart from the gifts Jesus gives.

The question, "Can these bones live?" must be asked one more time. This time, we ask the question of Jesus as He hangs from the cross with blood and water pouring from His side. On either side the robbers hang in the throes of death. Jesus already hangs dead. On the cross there at that moment, God died. He died on the cross. As His disciples take down His body from the cross and lay it into the tomb, they must certainly be asking the question, "Can these bones live?"

In fact, the only way in which the bones in the valley, the bones of Lazarus, or the bones of us here today can live is through the death of Jesus. If Jesus had not died and come back to life, our faith would be in vain. Both His death and resurrection are necessary and they belong together as one event. The text of the raising of Lazarus clearly demonstrates that even in Lent, we speak of the resurrection. We don't speak of Jesus' resurrection without speaking of His death and we don't speak of his death without the resurrection. By both His death and resurrection, Jesus gives life to bones long-dead.

So, "Can these bones live?" Jesus emphatically answers "yes!" Ezekiel stands over the valley of very dry bones and prophesies to those bones. In this event, God creates life out of death. Where once laid only dry dead bones, God made

an exceedingly great army. How? By His Word and Spirit. In the Hebrew, the word for breath is also the Word for Spirit. Ezekiel prophesied to God's Spirit to enter into those human beings who were once nothing but bones but now had flesh. The Spirit entered into them and they were given life. God used the Word of His prophet to bring forth life.

Jesus by His Word brings life back to Lazarus' bones. "Lazarus, come out!" Jesus commanded him and Lazarus came out. Lazarus demonstrates that he was the only one in the garden that day who had faith, for only faith receives God's gift of new life. Jesus commanded him to come out of the tomb and Lazarus came. Jesus put faith in Lazarus and he came forth in life. Those in the graveyard with Jesus had doubted however. Mary and Martha believed that Lazarus would come back on the last day, but doubted if Jesus could raise Lazarus immediately. The Jews mourning with Mary and Martha certainly did not believe Jesus could do such a great sign.

Yet the resurrection of Lazarus was not the only miracle in that graveyard. Jesus also created faith in the heart of the Jews. Many of them there believed in Jesus because of this great sign. The miraculous resurrection of Lazarus led many to believe in Jesus; Jesus also brought their dead bones to life.

"Can these bones live?" Jesus answers emphatically "Yes!" Jesus gave you new life in Baptism. He made your bag of bones lively once more. He animated your bones which stood opposed to Him and His law. By His Word combined with water he brought new life to you.

When we look at our culture of murdering death-deniers, we ask "Can these bones live?" When we look in the mirror and realize we often belong to this culture more than we thought, we have to ask the question of ourselves as well. To this question, Jesus also answers emphatically "yes! I can redeem those who belong to a culture opposed to me. I can bring them out of that culture and unite them wholly unto me. These bones can live!"

There are some bones who refuse life, however. There will be some who don't want anything to do with the life Jesus gives. There were some who saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead and reported it to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were afraid for their own power and decided to kill Jesus despite His life-giving power. They are "unraisable" bones because rather than receive Jesus' gifts, they remain in open and unrepentant sin. Lest we believe that once we're Baptized, we're once saved always saved, we must realize it is possible to turn from life and return to dead bones again. It is possible to willingly, continuously remain in unrepentant sin and thereby deny God's gift of life. Yet for the one who seeks shelter and finds comfort in God's forgiveness, new life is granted to those bones long dead.

Now, when your loved ones stand over your casket, as the dirt is flung into your grave and when they ask, "Can these bones live?" what will they say? Will it even matter? Who really cares? He who revitalizes dead bones cares. He gives life to your bones and life to the fullest. He gives you life which brims over into a strong and vibrant prayer life, an active role in the church and witnessing to your friends and neighbors. He gives you life full and unbounded by sin and fear of death.

In fact, through the preaching of His Word, He is breathing life into your bones. Just as He commanded Ezekiel to speak words which would bring life to bones long dead, here, He also creates life in your bones. He will also give you His own body and blood and which will reinvigorate your bones, another week to go out and live within a death obsessed culture. He is here in your midst; He is here giving you life.

As Jesus is here among you today, so one day he will stand over your grave and pronounce this blessing, "May God the Father, who created this body; may God the Son, who by His blood redeemed this body; may God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be His temple, keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh."

Then, on that last day of the resurrection of all flesh, the heavens will resound, all the hosts of heaven and all of God's saints will sing in joyous exaltation as Christ the victorious King comes the second time. They will sing as He comes to raise all flesh and give to His saints eternal life in His kingdom. After that moment, your once weary bones will never weary again. Your once lifeless bones will forever live with Jesus Christ who gave up His bones to death so that you might live with Him. To Him be all glory. Amen.