

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 20:19-29; 1 John 5:4-10

Breathe!

We used to know how to tell when people were dead. There was no need to go to court or gather a panel of experts. No breath, no life. And the breath was slowly sucked out of Jesus' lungs on the cross. With empty lungs, He was tossed into the tomb. Not holding His breath, He was dead. But He, who breathed life into the first Adam in the first creation, breathed again on the third day, the first day of a new week, as the new Adam, to make all things new.

And so there ain't no party like an empty tomb party, cause an empty tomb party don't stop. The white of Christ's innocence still drapes the cross and your hearts. The paschal candle still burns with the light of the resurrection. The lilies still breathe out the scent of life that wafts from the empty tomb, not to wreak havoc on my allergies, but to remind us to breathe, to remind us that there is nothing to breath out if you don't breathe anything in. And we have plenty to breathe in today, as God's lungs are filled will resurrection to resuscitate our dry bones.

Call Day is *the* day on the Seminary campus in Mequon. You spend eight years looking forward to it. As it draws near, guys start making lists of the congregations with vacancies, even putting together colorful maps to show where they are. We kid each other about where we're going to end up. A few guys say, "Anywhere but there," and guess where they are now. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is a better dispenser of His spokesmen than freshman pastors are.

In retrospect, while every single day isn't puppies and roses here at Christ (on a rare day it can be more Old Yeller and dandelions), I know that a lot of my classmates received much more challenging calls into the Ministry. Some walked into the eye of a firestorm set alight by warring families within the family of God. Some trudged knee deep into the mess another pastor left in his wake. Some dove into the debt of the ill-advised spending of well-meaning but shortsighted leaders. Some walked into quagmires I'm not at liberty to mention. I have a lot of classmates who received challenging calls into the ministry, but none as challenging as the Right Reverend Ezekiel, Bishop of Dry Bones and Dust, Dead-Man's District, Heaped in the Valley, Israel.

Jesus also walks into a heap of dry bones today. And, to be honest, while we may have dressed them up nice, we form our own little pile of dry bones as well. And you know what dry bones offer: nothing! Dry bones can't bargain with the Great Physician. They've no pockets to hold payment. The only treatment dry bones can hope for is the rarest kind: free treatment.

Dry bones have backbones that crumble when challenged, ear sockets but no ears, eyeholes but no eyes. Dry bones don't want to smile more and cry less. Dry bones don't want a more fulfilling and less stressful life. Dry bones don't want a pick-me-up for the week or an easy answer for today. Dry bones don't want anything, because dry bones are dead.

Dry bones only need, and they don't need more stuff or less hassles, fatter wallets or thinner waists, a less complicated marriage or more obedient kids, more electric worship or less formal preaching; they don't need to be wowed, they don't need to be wooed, and they don't need to be fixed. Dry bones need one thing: they need life. And until they get life, there's not much use dealing with all the other messy details of it. Those are issues for the living. One step at a time. No advice for the funeral director comes from the coffin.

It shouldn't surprise us when dead bones are lousy parents or spouses, dejected or underwhelmed, apathetic or misguided. What else can the dead be? When everything else seems to be going wrong, the first question we ask shouldn't be, "How can I jimmy-rig my life?" but rather, "What have I been breathing?" or more importantly, "Have I been breathing at all?"

Dry bones need someone to breath into them before they can even think about breathing out. They must inhale the life of God before they can exhale a godly life. And, unfortunately, dry bones can't make a decision, can't take the first step, can't be more or less willing; dry bones can only wait. And if you don't believe me, go to the cemetery and look and listen. There's nothing but waiting on the agenda of the dead as the grass grows over their head. There is nothing but waiting for one man: Jesus Christ.

Just as God breathed life into the dry bones in that valley in Israel, so now He breathed life into the dry bones in that locked room. Those quick to mourn Jesus' death but slow to celebrate His new life finally saw the light. But your twin was still lingering, having spent his Sunday apart from the flock. *"Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe."*

Eight days later, Jesus returns for the Monday night service. Finally, Thomas is there. And Jesus doesn't knock. He barges right in to make His presence known. *"Go ahead, Thomas. Here I am. And here are my wounds. I am not ashamed of them. I wear them like a Superbowl ring. I do not hide them. I display them for all to see. They are part of who I am, because I am forever for you."*

And Thomas keeps his hands in his pockets, even as his doubting heart rises in his throat, down which Jesus had a little more than a week earlier poured His Blood for the first time. He can do nothing to bring Himself to life, to breathe. Christ must do it for him. Christ, who raised Himself from the dead, must now raise His apostle. *"Do not disbelieve, but believe,"* Jesus says. Jesus bids the faith He has sown in Thomas' heart to do what faith does: believe. This is *"Lazarus, come out."* This is *"Little girl, get up."* This is *"Take your mat and walk."* This is *"Let there be."* And as it leaves Jesus' lips it puts the paddles to Thomas' heart. And Thomas, dry bones that he was, comes to life again. *"My God and my Lord,"* our twin marvels in a mix of repentance and forgiven praise.

And what about you? Jesus is breathing. And St. John didn't write all this for dry bones to stay dry. He explains, *"These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

And having heard so much, having seen so much, he just couldn't stop writing. After this, he wrote three more letters. In our second lesson from his first letter, he writes, *"This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the One who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree."*

People don't testify just to speak. They testify to be heard, to confirm the truth. And the same is true of the Spirit, the water, and the Blood, all of which proceed from the crucified Christ. You don't get to stick your fingers into His hands and your hands in His side, but He who took flesh to save you is determined to put meat on your frame, and so He splashes His words in your face, He places them on your tongue: *"Peace be with you."* *"Receive."*

Jesus has breathed into me and every dry-boned pastor that we might spread His benevolent breath around the bone heap as His ambassadors. *“If you forgive the sins of anyone,”* He says, *“they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”* So breathe. You are forgiven, dry bones. You live, dry bones. Now live forgiven. And I suppose that’s a good place to stop before I’m all out of breath. Amen.