

The Surprising Ways of God

Lent 5 A

Text: Ezekiel 37:1–14 and John 11:1–45

April 10, 2011

When Life Is a Valley of Dry Bones

The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va.
has a long and storied history.
It is the second oldest college in the United States.

In 1693, King William III and Queen Mary II of England
signed the charter to found a college in the Virginia Colony
giving birth to the College of William & Mary.
For a century and a half,
William and Mary was a leader
among American universities.

Several of our nation's Founding Fathers are numbered among its alumni
including three Presidents,
George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and John Tyler.
That led to William and Mary
being dubbed the nation's *Alma Mater*.
Then came the Civil War.

In the difficult days of Reconstruction after the war,
the college went bankrupt.
The campus was deserted and the buildings were deteriorating from neglect.

As with so many schools in the South after the Civil War,
William and Mary was nothing more than a *valley of dry bones*.
It was written off by everyone except its president, Benjamin Ewell.
Ewell, who was the 16th president of the college,
had given the best years of his life advocating the importance of education
and advancing the cause of the college.

Ewell was not about to give up on the future of William and Mary in its time of need.
Every morning, he went to the campus, climbed the tower of the main building,
and rang the bells, calling the school to class.

Even though the campus was deserted,
Ewell rang the bells every day for 7 years.
People thought he was crazy.
But Ewell rang the bells in defiance of the despair and hopelessness
that would destroy everything
he held dear.

Eventually Ewell's vigilance and hope paid off.
Over time, others began to catch his vision
and the students and teachers—and money—began to return.
Today, America's second oldest university thrives again
because of the improbable hope of one man,
Benjamin Ewell.¹

How do we maintain hope when life is nothing more than a *valley of dry bones*?
That's an important question for us to ask ourselves
as we face difficult and trying times today.

As we look at the vision that is given to Ezekiel,
we see that hope emerges from an
abiding faith and trust in God.
Hope is rooted in the faith and expectation
that God will be
faithful to his promises.

This vision of the *valley of dry bones* is given to Ezekiel
at a devastating time in the history of the Jews.
God's people are being held in captivity in Babylon.

Jerusalem and the Temple
have been reduced to nothing more than a pile of rubble.
No doubt, it must have seemed to these exiles that God was dead.
They were utterly destroyed, physically, emotionally and spiritually.
At this time in their history they are nothing more
than a *valley of dry bones*.

That is the context in which Ezekiel
is given this vision
that shows him a new reality.

God's people have lost their land, their Temple,
their Davidic king, their covenant, and their relationship with God.
Israel—as they understand it—is dead.
They are like dry bones, strewn across a parched and desolate valley.
No human hand or effort can restore them;
they are beyond all hope.

Amidst this scene of desolation and destruction,
God asks Ezekiel a powerful question.
It is a question that is important
for the Jews who are in exile:
Son of man, can these bones live?
It is an important question
for you and me as well:

Can these bones live—can God resurrect lives that lay in ruins?

- A young man in a wheelchair, crippled by an accident,
asks his friend,
Do I have a future?
- A couple sitting in a counselor's office
asks the therapist,
Can our marriage be saved?
- A widow sinks into a chair after the burial of her husband
and wonders,
Can I go on?

Son of man, can these bones live?

- Can that which is dead be returned to life?
- Can a situation that is hopeless be recovered, revived, resurrected?
- Is there any hope when life is nothing more than a *valley of dry bones*?

Many people live in a *valley of dry bones*.

Charles Plumb, the author of the book *I'm No Hero*, has been in that valley.

Plumb was a Navy aviator

who was shot down over North Vietnam during the war.

He bailed out over enemy territory and was quickly captured.

For the next 6 years his home was an 8' x 8' cell
with a dirt floor
and a tin can for a toilet.

His captors frequently tortured him twisting his body with ropes.

Just when it got to the point he was sure he couldn't take any more,
they would twist the ropes even tighter.

Many times he was thrown back in his cell with torn muscles.

Somehow, he managed to
survive each instance of torture.

One day when he was near the breaking point,

Plumb saw a wire appear beneath the bamboo wall of his cell
and wiggle as if giving a signal.

He watched the wire wondering if it was a trick by his captors.

Finally, after several days, he got up enough courage to pull on the wire.
When he did, he found it came from another prisoner.

The other POW asked, *How are you doing?*

Plumb told him. *I don't know if I can take it anymore.*

The other POW told Plumb, *That's Prison Thinking and it can kill you.*

The fellow POW went on to explain,

*Prison Thinking is feeling sorry for yourself
and finding others to blame for your problems.*

The other POW told him that to make it out of there, he needed to have *faith*

—*faith in God, faith in his country
and faith in his fellow POW's.*

He also needed to have Commitment—something to live for—
and Pride—a belief in his self-worth
that refused to surrender his dignity.

Plumb took those words to heart and managed to survive his captivity.

When he was finally freed at the end of the war, he tried to call his wife.

When he couldn't locate her, he called his parents.

When he asked where his wife was,

they had to tell him she was divorcing him
to marry another man.²

Plumb's life had been reduced to a *valley of dry bones*—
6 years as a POW in an 8' x 8' cell, endless torture at the hands of his captors,
and now abandonment by his wife, who was his high school sweetheart.

But in the midst of all that rot and decay,
Plumb experienced the power
and grace of God
breathing new life
into the carcass
his life had become.

How could he go on with his life?

- The lawyers told him to sue his wife and her fiancé.
The *legal eagles* told him,
That'll fix'em.
- The psychologists told him he had every reason to be angry.
The *shrinks* told him,
You've need to get angry and let it out.

Plumb disagrees.

I didn't need to get even or get angry.
I needed to get better.

How could he get better?

How could he get on with a life that had been reduced
to a *valley of dry bones*?

First and foremost, with faith!

He had the faith that God could and would breathe new life into him.
And God did.

That is what we learn from Ezekiel's vision of the *valley of dry bones*.

In faith, we can have the audacity to hope that God can and will breathe new life
into hopeless situations and hopeless lives.

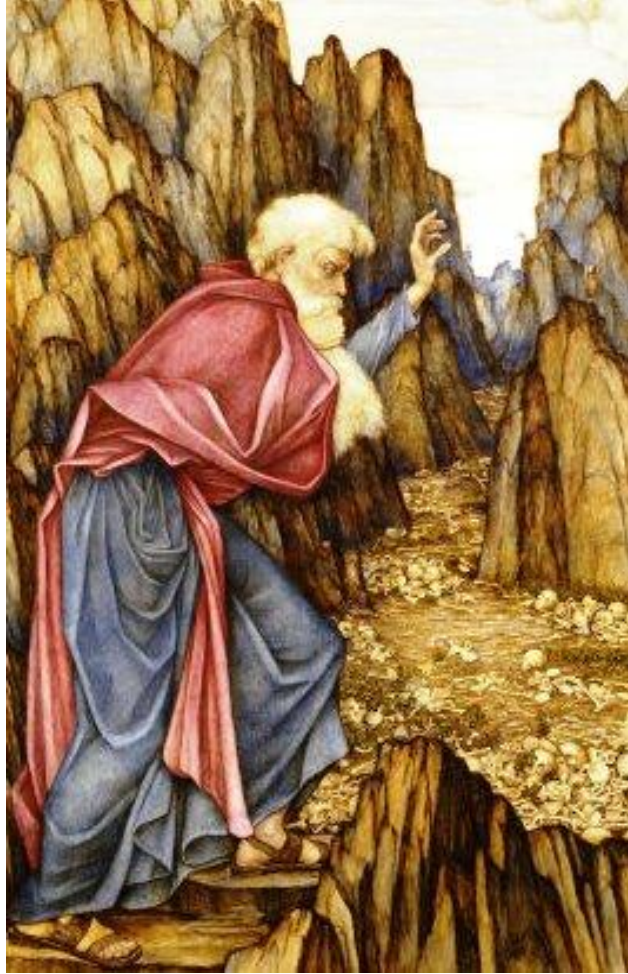
We dare to hope that God can and will be faithful to his promises.

God restored Israel from a people in exile
to a people restored.

And God brought new life to Charles Plumb
who has inspired countless numbers of people
with his books and motivational speeches.

Because of the cross, we can have the audacity to hope in faith
that God can and will turn our defeats into his victories
giving us new life

—not just in the world to come, but right here...right now—
a new life that is far greater than anything
the world can imagine or understand.



¹ A Daffy, *Magnificent Hope*, www.sermons.com, downloaded 2-22-11

² Charles Plumb, *Packing Parachutes*, www.youtube.com, downloaded 2-22-11