

“Can these bones live?”

Can you imagine the scene that the prophet Ezekiel was given to see – a valley full of dry bones? And if that were not enough, the Lord asks Ezekiel – “can these bones live?” It’s the question posed to Mary and Martha as they stood at the tomb of their brother Lazarus. It’s the question posed to you today.

Contrary to our human reason – the answer is a resounding YES. They can live – when God’s Word is preached to them, and God’s Spirit is breathed into them. YES, a valley full of dead dry bones can live – and YOUR bones can, and will, live – because Jesus died and has been raised to life – never to die again.

Bones are what are left of us when everything else is gone – the last record of our death to disappear into dust. A skull and crossbones warn us of deadly things. When we see bones, we can’t help but think of death.

The prophet Ezekiel is shown a valley full of bones that have been dead for a long time – with all the life sucked out of them – not a chance of being resuscitated. “Son of man, can these bones live?” “O Lord God, you know.”

And the Lord said to Ezekiel, “Prophesy over these bones.” Ezekiel, these dead, dry bones are your congregation, your hearers, your parishioners. Preach my Word to them. Tell them, “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breathe to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

And as Ezekiel preached God’s Word to his congregation – their dead, dry bones began to rattle and move – and bones came together, bone tendoned to bone, bones covered with flesh and skin.

God’s Word is living and active. His Word does what it says – creates what it commands – produces what it proclaims. His Word is life-giving. The bones do nothing but lay there, dead and dry – but the Word of God preached through the prophet had its living and creative way with them.

We confess that God the Holy Spirit, “the Lord and giver of life” – works through the Word of God. God’s Word is inspired – it is “God breathed” – it is Spirit filled. “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy 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.”

Word and breath – Word and Spirit – are always together. Where the Word of God is preached – there the Holy Spirit is at work, preaching. And where this Word and Spirit are at work – a congregation of dead bones springs to life – for the Lord who raised Jesus from the dead, has given us the Holy Spirit, as a seal and guarantee of the resurrection of our bones on the Last Day.

Jesus says that, “My words are Spirit and they are life.” His words breathe life into the dead – into Lazarus, four days dead in the tomb – and into us today – and then on the day of our resurrection.

His words breathed life into man “in the beginning.” They are the words with which He ordained His apostles when He breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. The sins you forgive are forgiven, the sins you retain are retained.” And when these words are spoken to you “in the stead and by the command” of our Lord Jesus Christ – He is breathing life into you.

That same bone-rattling, life-breathing, corpse-raising Word is preached into your ears in the Divine Service. Are you a little dead this morning – stayed out too late last night – baby kept you up – have work (or play) on your mind – can’t wait to get out of here? Never mind all of that – hear the Word of the Lord and live!

As Lutherans you’ve probably heard others chastise us for using dead, dry hymns and liturgies. Well, it’s true that we are dead – but its not because of our hymns and liturgies – for they bring us the Word of God which keeps us alive!

We are dead because of our inherent sinfulness – but there is good news – for Jesus delights in forgiving sinners and raising the dead. That’s why He was crucified and raised from the dead. That’s why He sends the Holy Spirit – so that by His Word, He might raise us from the death of unbelief and breathe His life into us.

As it was in Ezekiel’s day – and on the Day of Pentecost – so it is today. The Holy Spirit is poured out on you through God’s Word – raising dead sinners to life. Once you were dead in your trespasses and sins, the Bible says – objects of God’s wrath – separated from Him by your sin. “But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.”

Without Christ you are nothing but dead bones waiting to be buried – but now, by the gift of God, you have been made alive with Jesus – you are baptized – you have received the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

“Can these bones live?” Can these bones filled with cancer, arthritis, pain, sorrow and suffering – can these bones filled with guilt and shame and despair – can these bones live? Can your bones live, even though you die?

God says YES! In Jesus, your bones live now, and they will live forever. “You shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live ...”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ – God has spoken – and He will do it. You can trust Him with your life – for He has given you His Word, and His Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.