

the Rev. Karen Millard  
Squamish United Church

April 10 , 2011

Scripture Readings:

Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

### **Spirit of Life**

Today's texts hold some of my favorite moments in the stories of our faith. Two Sundays before Easter we are offered resurrection stories of a different kind. Both are miracle stories - Lazarus resurrected from the dead, and a valley of dry bones brought to life.

You may have noticed in the last couple of years that the primary themes of my faith story are grace, abundance and new life. I wish my focus of faith was on abundance, grace and new life because that is all I have known. But the fact is I love these stories because there is nothing I long for more both for myself and for all of creation.

I have had moments when I have glimpsed fullness of life but like everyone else I have moments when I simply hope to find it again some day.

There have been more than a few days when I have felt like Ezekiel in a Valley of Dry bones and I have found myself calling out to God "Can these bones live? You the one who knows." There I have been days when I like Martha have stood in defense and accusation wondering where God has been. And yet like this prophet and disciple I know that the only place I will find true breath of life is in the spirit of The Holy. And most likely that is why I embrace these themes of faith so fully.

Having just spent another week with Peter Short I am again moved to compassion with the words "Never look down on a struggle for life." Because each of us has one. It's part of the human condition.

Even Jesus' human condition shows a struggle for life. In this chapter of John Jesus grieves over the death of his friend. He grieves with the pain of each and every one gathered with him.

Kathryn Matthews Huey wrote "In this story, there is so much of the human experience:

- receiving word of a loved one's illness and need;
- decision-making, timing, and complications, even risks and dangers to be considered;
- frustrations, questioning, and lack of understanding on the part of those closest to us;
- grief and mourning by loved ones, and the community encircling them, perhaps not all with the purest of intentions...

- limited understanding of what we ourselves are saying, and of the potential of what we are saying;
- courage, anger, and weeping;
- familiar, powerful echoes of other moments in the story we share:<sup>1</sup>

And as always there is a range of reactions of those who are present. Some respond in faith and courage, others in fear and worry. And perhaps most importantly this event is the final catalyst for Jesus' death. He is now more than ever seen as dangerous. Authorities wonder how someone so powerful can be left to these people? He after all was offering 'false hope;' life in death. This story of deep friendship puts great fear into people who don't know what to do with hope, love and life beyond measure.

And that as far as I am concerned is the point of the story. This is not a story I can easily explain away. I know that there were ritual ceremonies of fasting and preparation for death in some societies. To be purified and become part of a faith one would lie as dead for a time so that they could be resurrected to new life. This ritual has a similar purpose to a modern day baptism. This may help explain Jesus' lack of rush to the graveside of Lazarus. But normally one would be raised sooner and Lazarus was waiting for Jesus to come and heal him and cleanse him and it seems he either died or (some say went into a coma). Jesus was obviously concerned - he wept, he prayed, he wondered, and he performed a miracle that day not matter what it was that took place. Resurrection, revival, resuscitation - Whatever it was it brought life, and new hope and faith not only to Lazarus but to the disciples and a whole community of people.

But then and still today we live in a world that doesn't really know what to do with those of us who believe in life and abundance. It is so contrary to the worlds view even those of us who believe in it find it hard to grasp. I have had so many conversations in these last two weeks about exhaustion. I look at my colleagues, my friends, my companions, and all that journey with me and I see tired spirits. I find it in myself. It's not that there is something horrific going on in my life - it's just a cycle. We try to keep balance, we strive to do spiritual practices, we try to say 'no' but...

Oh Dry bones hear the word of God...Can these bones live? Your the one who knows....

Lazarus 'come out' ... 'unbind him.'

Jesus commands life. He calls for light and life.

Today we are clearly reminded that God speaks to us in the deadness of our lives. "When pressed to the edge, when faced with the absolute end of all that we have known or can imagine, we are thrown back on the mercy of the God who commands Lazarus, and in time each of us, to come forth. The responsibility for life – creating it in the first place and recreating it once again –

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Matthews Huey <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/april-10-2011-fith-sunday.html>

is wholly God's."<sup>2</sup> And yet the next thing we hear is ‘unbind him.’ The work is not God’s alone. New life is a work of all creation. We have a role to play in the bringing about of abundance and life in this world.

That’s the prophecy of Ezekiel. This is a story of a whole community that considers itself dead. They are hopeless and filled with despair. This is about the death and resurrection not of an individual but of a whole nation. The dead dry bones are the bones of a community in exile. “According to Walter Brueggemann, the prophet's words concern "the crisis of 587 B.C.E. in Jerusalem and the consequent season of displacement and disarray in the exile" (*An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*). Ezekiel himself was in exile, taken from the land of his birth following the Babylonian siege of Judah.”<sup>3</sup>

"It is difficult to exaggerate the seriousness of the Exile as a national disaster and a crisis of faith," Gene Tucker writes. "The Judeans had lost the land promised to their ancestors and granted in the time of Joshua. The last of the Davidic kings was a captive, first in prison and then at the court of the Babylonian monarch (2 Kings 25:27-30). The temple, where the Lord made his name to dwell and where his glory was known, lay in ruins" (*Preaching through the Christian Year A*). From his place in exile, Ezekiel heard of what had transpired at home. What was once a vibrant, thriving economic and spiritual community was laid to waste – left in ruins, with its former residents scattered.”<sup>4</sup>

It is from the place of loss of community, economy, and spiritual practice that Ezekiel finds himself dreaming of this valley of dry bones. These bones speak to more than a lack of life in a religious community where dead bodies were considered impure. They spoke to a loss of faith and purity. As a priest, Ezekiel would have been cast out for being in the presence of dead bodies. This only speaks to the despair he must have felt. To be impure was to be without God. Even the prophet must have felt God was absent.

But here is the best part of the vision for me. Even God is present in the Valley of Dry bones. “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely (v.11) the prophet says. This community is hopeless, life has been drained away. But God encourages Ezekiel to find faith. To speak hope, and life. God calls the prophet to speak an entirely different way of being to this community. They are called to change the lens in which they live. They are to believe life in the midst of death. They are being called to believe that God resides not only in the temple but within them. They are experiencing God more fully than they ever have before. In a new place and time they are recognizing a God they have never even noticed. All the deadness has come to life - even in exile.

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<sup>2</sup> Lose David - [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, Karen Georgia - Minister for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations with the Office of General Ministries of the United Church of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> IBID

Imagine the possibilities if we were to believe in life, and abundance? Imagine what our dried up, weary places could do if we allowed the life giving spirit to seep in. “The promise of new life means accommodating a new way for God to be at work in the world. New life is the place where hope transforms what is into what can be. The gift of new life is fully attached to the breath of the Divine.

The words of the prophet can get the people and the restoration only so far. Essential to the recovery of these dry bones is the spirit of God. It is the very breath of God that makes a difference in the life and death of the community.

New hope. New possibilities. New life. New ways of thinking. New ways of being in the world. New ways of living in community. New way of embracing God. New ways of understanding God's presence. All facilitated by the presence of the spirit, the *ruah*, the very breath and Spirit of God.”<sup>5</sup>

I believe we are all being called to new life and hope. In those places where we doubt ourselves we are being called to believe. As a congregation we are called to live in hope and faith and possibility.

Ronald Clements writes. This is a story "of men and women at the end of their tether. Yet standing against this hopelessness is the ability of the prophet to awaken belief in hope, established an awareness of God's reality and power. What seems impossible in human terms is possible to God" (*Ezekiel, Westminster Bible Companion*). Can these dry bones live? Imagine the possibilities!”<sup>6</sup>

God is still speaking to us today. Calling “Lazarus, come out!” “Unbind him” “Prophecy to these bones.” Call your dreams and your wishes that seem dead and dried up back to life. Allow “The Holy spirit to come rushing in like the four winds breath and bring them new life again.”<sup>7</sup>

Kathryn Matthews Huey states “*God is still speaking to us today, calling us out from our tombs of despair, denial, and death to new life, right now, right here.*” She goes on to ask “*What are those tombs for us as a congregation? In what ways do we participate in what God is doing, today, in our midst, when God brings new life in the face of death? How are you "unbinding" and "letting go" those who have been put into such places of death?*

*Are we standing around and watching, formulating judgments and deciding what we'll believe and how much we'll believe it, or are we moving to the center of what's happening, pulling back the "stuff" of death, the things that surround death, and releasing the new life that God has granted, the new life that lies just beneath the surface of what appears bleak and beyond hope?*

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<sup>5</sup> IBID

<sup>6</sup> IBID

<sup>7</sup> Good, Linnea “Dry Bones, Hear the Word of God”

*Are there some among us who are calculating the costs and the possible unpleasantness of giving ourselves over to the power of God, even to healing and new life?”<sup>8</sup>*

God is calling us on this journey of faith; In our tired times to allow the spirit of life to breath into us in such a way that we and all those around us experience The Holy in a way we have never dreamed possible.

Let us pray “O God Send us your spirit, renew the face of the earth” May your life giving spirit revive us like a stream through in desert of the valley of dry bones. We call for life and abundance this day.

amen

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<sup>8</sup> huey, IBID