

**"From Taps to Reveille"**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-8, 11-14**  
**John 11:17-27, 32-38, 41-44**

[Immediately after the scripture lessons, Paul Belser played TAPS on the trumpet.]

Since both passages take place in cemeteries, a virtual one in Babylon and the other at a tomb in Bethany – Taps seems like an appropriate way to begin. Note that I said *begin*. God's final answer is not found in either of these cemeteries.

**"Can these bones live?"** God asked Ezekiel. The question comes from about 500 years before Christ when God's people lived as exiles in the pagan land of Babylon. Whatever hardships they suffered, none was more difficult to bear than to be separated from Jerusalem and the temple which lay in ruins. Worship in any other place was unthinkable, even forbidden. **"By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion,"** the Psalmist lamented about those days.<sup>i</sup> There they hung up their harps, even as their captors mocked them saying, "Put on a happy face and play the happy songs of Zion." **"How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"**

The cemetery Ezekiel saw in his vision must have resembled an expansive Death Valley, with bones scattered as far as the eye could see. It was an image that captured the utter despair and hopelessness of God's people. **"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."**<sup>ii</sup> **"Can these bones live?"** "God only knows," the prophet replied. Since Ezekiel didn't know, God answers his own question.

Now hear the word of the Lord. Your toe bone connected to your foot bone. Your foot bone connected to your ankle bone. Your ankle bone connected to your leg bone. Your leg bone connected to your thigh bone. Your thigh bone connected to your hip bone. Your hip bone connected to your back bone. Your back bone connected to your shoulder bone. Your shoulder bone connected to your neck bone. Your neck bone connected to your head bone. Now hear the word of the Lord...

Of course these bones can and will live. Don't judge tomorrow by looking at today for God is not finished with his people.

**"Can these bones live?"** There is no place where that question is asked with more urgency than at Presbyterian headquarters in Louisville and not just in Louisville, but in the headquarters of most denominations. You may have read about or have seen stories on TV news about a survey recently released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life.<sup>iii</sup> More than 40% of U. S. adults have changed the faith tradition in which they were brought up as children. 16% of adults say they belong to no religious denomination, twice the share reported in a 1990 survey. I know of one theologian who refers to the "church alumni association."

An article in last Monday's *Inquirer* reports on a young woman who is a freshman at Temple University. She has been straying from her Presbyterian roots in Doylestown.

“I went along with Christianity through most of my childhood,” she says, “but I guess I’m trying to find certain things out on my own.” She no longer thinks of herself as a Presbyterian, but she still regards religion as the most compelling question in her life and has looked into Judaism and Buddhism.

There is a great deal of “fluidity of religious identity in this country,” says the author of the report. The church isn’t what it used to be. People are becoming more like religious consumers than seekers of someone to whom they would commit their lives and follow.

**“Can these bones live?”** It is a question born of despair. We forget that the question was first asked by God. We forget that God expected a positive answer. “Yes, these bones can live!” In spite of how you feel right now, **“...you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live ...”**

Maybe organized religion as we know it will continue to wither away even as people experience unprecedented levels of spiritual hunger and restlessness. Denominational labels are less and less important for more and more people. Maybe denominations will continue to decline resulting in a less fragmented Christianity. Maybe we are unaware of new forms of faithfulness that are already present among us. Maybe there are others waiting in the wings. All this change drives many to a sense of despair and hopelessness. In just may be, however, that all this change is a sign that God is bringing dry bones to life.

Let us not be so fearful about the future of the church that we begin to think our mission as a church is to save the church, or to do whatever is necessary to protect our market share. Our mission has always been and will continue to be to proclaim in word and deed, the Gospel of God’s redeeming love, whether we feel we are exiled or well established, and to trust the outcome to God. Let us not forget what God spoke through another prophet, Isaiah: **“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth ... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”<sup>iv</sup>**

I know – we would prefer for the church to be revived or resuscitated, to go back to the way it used to be. But that’s not how God works. God is about resurrection and *new* life. **“Do not cling to events of the past or dwell on what happened long ago,”** says the Lord. **“Watch for the new thing I am going to do...”<sup>v</sup>**

**“Can these bones live?”** The question is asked in a different way by those aware of the death of Lazarus. **“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”** Well, I suppose, he could have. Can’t God do anything God wants? Yes, but that leaves us with a more burdensome question – why would God not want to keep Lazarus from dying?” He couldn’t, not and at the same time help us live authentic lives, which the Bible calls **“life abundant,”<sup>vi</sup>** or **“eternal life.”<sup>vii</sup>**

As good as it first may seem, avoiding death is not the ultimate answer to human need. Can you imagine what it would be like if no one had died since the beginning of creation? We think traffic around here is bad now! Can you imagine what it would be like to live forever in this world of sin and sadness? Someone has quipped about all those people who want to live forever even though they don't know how to spend a rainy Saturday afternoon. Talk about hell!

Even the raising of Lazarus is not the final answer for his need. Human being that he is, he's only going to have to die again. His family will only have to grieve again. Maybe the next time their grief would be compounded by the violent way in which Lazarus dies. In the next chapter of John's gospel, we are told that the religious leaders plotted to kill Lazarus, as well as Jesus.<sup>viii</sup>

**"There is a time to be born and a time to die,"** says the scripture.<sup>ix</sup> Being rescued *from* death is not what we need. Triumph *over* death is what we need. Being freed from the *fear* of death is what we need. Death does not have to rule our lives. Death is not God's last word. The raising of Lazarus is a *sign* of him who is Lord and who is the last word: **"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."** Obviously he doesn't mean we will never die physically. To live and believe in Jesus is to enjoy a quality of life that is held by a love which cannot be destroyed by anything in life or in death.<sup>x</sup>

Even though we die we will live. Even though? There is a sense in the New Testament that it is only when we die that we will live. **"Truly, truly, I say to you,"** said Jesus, **"unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."**<sup>xi</sup> On one level, that speaks about our physical death. St. Paul uses that same imagery in 1 Corinthians 15 as an analogy about the resurrection body.

On another level, however, it speaks about the reality of our life in Christ right now. The only way to be brought to new life in him is for the old life to die. Jesus also said, **"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."**<sup>xii</sup> The more we attempt to save our own life, the less we rely on God's grace and that is to lose. The more we hold on to the past, the more we will miss the future.

Of course, we'd rather not to deal with death at all. We'd prefer to journey to Easter without this little side trip into the graveyards at Babylon and Bethany. But the way of our Lord is clearly that of going through the valley of dry bones, through the valley of the shadow of death, not around it. In the words of one theologian,

What we have is a God who resurrects us from the dead, putting an end to it by working through it instead of around it—creating life in the midst of grief, creating love in the midst of loss, creating faith in the midst of despair--resurrecting us from our big and little deaths, showing us by his own example that the only road to Easter morning runs smack through Good Friday.<sup>xiii</sup>

Winston Churchill planned his own funeral. At his direction, a bugler positioned high above the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, intoned after the benediction the sound of "Taps," the universal signal that the day is over. But then came a most dramatic turn. As Churchill had instructed, as soon as "Taps" had been played, another bugler, placed on the opposite side of the dome, played the notes of "Reveille:" "It's time to get up! It's time to get up! It's time to get up in the morning!"

From *Taps* to *Reveille*. TAPS – The reminder that we begin to die the day we are born and Jesus isn't going to change that reality, not for individuals or institutions or nations or empires. Death is a part of the cycle of life. But, REVEILLE – The reminder that death is not the final word and that because of Him who is resurrection and life we can confidently sing, **"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? ... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."**<sup>xiv</sup>

[As you might have imagined by now, Paul Belser brought the sermon to a rousing conclusion by playing REVEILLE!]

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i. Psalm 137

ii. Ezekiel 37:11

iii. Information has been taken mostly from an article in the March 3, 2008 edition of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Temple students reflect findings of religion poll," by David O'Reilly.

iv. Isaiah 55:10-11

v. Isaiah 43:18-19, Good News Bible

vi. John 10:10, Good News Bible

vii. John 17:3

viii. John 12:10

ix. Ecclesiastes 3:2

x. See Romans 8

xi. John 12:10

xii. Mark 8:35

xiii. Barbara Brown Taylor, Christian Century, March 13, 1996

xiv. 1 Corinthians 15:55-57