

2018 Joint Annual Conference – Ordination Service

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

I have a confession to make. For a period of time in my life, 12 years to be exact, I saw dead people. As soon as I woke up in the morning I saw dead people. In fact, I saw dead people every time I looked out my living room window.

It's not like that kid in *The Sixth Sense*. I saw dead people because for 12 years Robin and I lived in Colma, California, which has a population of over a million dead people and 1200 living people. Let me explain.

In the 1860's when San Francisco was growing by leaps and bounds thanks to the Gold Rush, wise city planners realized that if they kept burying the dead within city limits, they would run out of precious space on this peninsula. So in 1900, the city bought a 2.2 square mile plot of land just south of the city, exhumed the bodies of all those who had been buried, moved them down to Colma, and banned all future burials within the city limits.

Today Colma has 17 different cemeteries, including four Jewish cemeteries, the country's only Greek Orthodox cemetery, two Chinese cemeteries, as well as Italian, Japanese, Serbian, and pauper's burial grounds. There's also a pet cemetery, where it is rumored that Tina Turner's dog is resting 6 feet under wrapped in one of Turner's fur coats. Personally, being from New York, I loved being able to say that I lived across the street from Joe DiMaggio.

We in Colma are never far from the dead. That's why when you move to Colma, you get a bumper sticker that reads, "It's great to be alive in Colma".

Living in a town of so much death reminds me of Ezekiel, chapter 37:1-14:

God grabbed me. God's Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. I was led around and among them—a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain—dry bones, bleached by the sun. God said to me, "O Mortal One, can these bones live?"

I said, "Master God, only you know that."

God said to me, "Prophecy over these bones: 'Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!'"

God told the dry bones, "Watch this: I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am God!"

I prophesied just as I'd been commanded. As I prophesied, there was a sound and, oh, rustling! The bones moved and came together, bone to bone. I kept watching. Sinews formed, then muscles on the bones, then skin stretched over them. But they had no breath in them.

God said to me, "Prophecy to the breath. Prophecy, Human One. Tell the breath, 'God says, Come from the four winds. Come, breath. Breathe on these slain bodies. Breathe life!'"

So I prophesied, just as he commanded me. The breath entered them and they came alive! They stood up on their feet, a huge army.

Then God said to me, "Human One, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Listen to what they're saying: 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, there's nothing left of us.'

"Therefore, prophecy. Tell them, 'God, the Master, says: I'll dig up your graves and bring you out alive—O my people! Then I'll take you straight to the land of Israel. When I dig up graves and bring you out as my people, you'll realize that I am God. I'll breathe my life into you and you'll live. Then I'll lead you straight back to your land and you'll realize that I am God. I've said it and I'll do it.'"

As bizarre as the imagery of the valley of dry bones is, I know something about it and it's more than just living in Colma. As a bishop of the church who has been a pastor for more than half my life, one who has vowed to "hold God's people in my heart," I know what it is like to walk amidst the valley of dry bones, for that is one of the tasks of a pastor.

Over the years, many of my parishioners and colleagues have revealed to me their dry bones, while many more of you probably didn't realize just how much of your dry bones were showing, but I see them nonetheless. And my heart aches for you for I too know what it feels like to be in that valley, I have resided there myself, and so I find great hope and comfort in this vision that Ezekiel has of not just the dry bones but of what God can do with them, how they can be reconnected, how flesh can be restored and strength regained by the Word and Breath of God until these old dry bones can stand on their own two feet again. As new pastors and seasoned pastors, as long time lay leaders and folks who are new to the faith, I hope you, too, find comfort and hope in this--how God's spirit can provide restoration when we are feeling most dried up, hope when we are most in despair, and new life when death seems all around us.

If the prophet Ezekiel was carried by the Holy Spirit out of his time and place and dropped in the middle of The United Methodist Church on June 10, 2018, what do you think he would see? To get even more specific, if he found himself in the middle of the Mountain Sky Area/Conference of The United Methodist Church, what would he find? If he found himself in your community, in your church, would he wonder if he was once again dropped in a valley of dry bones?

It is more than just this water drought that makes me wonder if I am living in a desert and surrounded by dead bones. Death is a constant figure looming around us. The other day I was walking briskly to an appointment when I passed a small impromptu shrine on a street corner, its

dying flowers marking the place a person took his or her last breath. “Pedestrian run over, or gunshot?” What shocked me most of all was how easily I asked myself the question, no horror or disbelief.

Every day we learn of one more casualty in the war on black and brown young men that is being waged in this country, we hear of more deaths in the Middle East, more deaths due to drug overdoses in towns across this nation, more families separated by a flawed immigration policy, another school shooting. Dry bones and death are everywhere.

There is another death we are experiencing, the death of civility. Road rage has turned our highway lanes into turf wars. I was driving home one day and saw two cars stopped in the fast lane. One man got out of the car with a baseball bat and started to pummel the other car. There is death on our highways, in the supermarket, on our city streets, and even on social media, as we seem to have forgotten how to interact with each other in generous, gracious ways.

There is death in the place that is meant to be most life-affirming—the Christian Church. For many people in the United States, the church is irrelevant and outdated, woefully out of touch with the needs and concerns of our post-modern world. The church has forgotten that it exists to do one thing and to do it excellently: share God’s love with the world. This life-affirming word has been replaced with ashes and dust of crushed dry bones as we fight amongst ourselves.

We know, every single one of us, what it means to be in the midst of the valley of dry bones. Death surrounds us in our neighborhoods and around the world. Main streets throughout our region often are boarded up. Young people move away. Family farms and ranches are in financial distress. Even if you think you are personally excused from this death, ask any scientist about how the levels of pollution in our air and water are shortening your life.

The Spirit said to Ezekiel, “These bones say, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, there’s nothing left of us” (Ez. 37:11). We echo those bones in the valley of death. We too cry out that our lives are dried up. Our hope is lost. There’s nothing left of us. Life looks hopeless. Death seems to have the upper hand.

How do we cope with the death that surrounds us? What do we do with our feelings of depression, fear, and rage when we feel the pain of living in a world where death in all its forms is so prevalent?

O people of the Mountain Sky Area/Conference! We are to stand with the prophet Ezekiel, right in the middle of death in the valley of dry bones. We must look with open eyes at the rubble around us. We must stand unflinchingly, not distracting ourselves by overworking or by our addictions, we must survey the scene and not divert our eyes as we listen for the Spirit of God to ask us, “O mortal one, can these bones live? O woman, can these bones live? O man, can these bones live?”

New pastors, this is the life to which you have been called! Lay leaders, this is what God asks of you.

If we trust in God, through our rage and through our hurt and through our tears we will answer, “O God, only you know that.” And God will say to us, “Watch! I am bringing the breath of life to you and you’ll come to life...you’ll come alive and realize that I am God!”

Look around at our world. Can this nation live? Can our earth live? Can our beloved United Methodist Church live? O God, only you know that. Can we learn to get angry and rage and admit our woundedness and our fear and cry—not alone, but together? O God, only you know that.

“I’ll dig up your graves and bring you out alive—o my people! I’ll breathe my life into you and you’ll live.”

Just as the tomb could not hold Jesus, but that stone got rolled away because death held no candle to resurrection, so too, this resurrection power is available to us all. God calls us from death to life. God desires to breathe life into our world, our nation, our church, our relationships. There’s a whole lotta shaking going on. Death has held us in its grasp for too long.

Can these bones live? The dead dry bones of peace, of beauty, or wholeness, of reconciliation, of forgiveness are stirring, coming back to life. Can you hear the rattling? Can you feel the connections being made, one life connected to another life, held together by sinews of love and mutuality?

Can these bones live? Can you feel the breath of life moving in you and through you, through our city streets, in our relationships? Can you feel the surging of life reawakening church communities that are gripped by death’s slumber? Can you feel new life coming into dead and dried out relationships? The bones continue to rattle, to join together, connect once again.

Can these bones live? Those old, dried up, achy bones are rising up, reaching for justice, reaching for recovery, reaching for right relationships. The bones continue to rattle, and call you into connection.

Can these bones live? As disciples of Jesus, can you bring the Gospel’s Good News to those who are hungry for a word of hope? Will you be an agent of God’s saving work? Will you walk with Christ into the very places that stink of death so that love’s redeeming work can occur?

Can these bones live? God is calling us to be the new Ezekiels, to allow God's spirit to breathe anew in our world. To restore hope in the hearts of bone-weary people. To roll up out of death's clutches and be bearers of light and life in the world. Will you help these bones live again? Will you allow God to work through you so that new life can be offered? Will you dare to preach Good News in the very face of death?

Shake, rattle and roll these bones to new life, so the world can shrug off death's grip and justice and hope and love and peace may live in the hearts and minds of all people!