

Ezek. 37:1 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. 5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 I will lay sinews on 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."

Ezek. 37:7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Ezek. 37:11 Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

From the very beginning of his work, it's pretty clear that the prophet Ezekial is one strange dude; the kind of guy we would cross the street to avoid. We have difficulty knowing what he's saying. He has a vision of creatures with four faces which are followed by wheels that turn below them as they move above.

And then, there are many more passages like the one I've just read. It has the same stamp of strangeness upon it. It's like some precursor to a shabby horror film, this vision of dead bones becoming enfleshed and joining together into bodies, the idea that God is going to go around opening up graves,

bringing people out of them and re-constituting their flesh. Weird as he is though, even Ezekial seems to have been aware that he was using symbols and metaphors to describe what was ultimately indescribable. And, despite the shadow of zombieism hanging over it, the indescribable thing he is struggling to describe in this passage is hope.

We know a great deal about when Ezekial prophesied, and why. After much political maneuvering, in which the kingdom of Southern Israel was a pawn in a larger power play between Egypt and Babylon, the Israelites misplayed their hand and were besieged by the Babylonians in 598 BC. Jerusalem surrendered, and the king, his family, the government officials, and the leading citizens were led away into exile in Babylon. Another king was established on the throne, with the expectation that he would become a loyal servant to the Babylonians. But that king, also, was persuaded that an alliance with Egypt would be better for Israel. In response to his disloyalty, Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem again, in 588, and this time, at the siege's end in 586, the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem entirely, murdered much of the population, and led the rest into captivity in Babylon.

At the time that Ezekiel is seeing the valley of the dry bones, he is telling this vision to a people who feel themselves utterly defeated, who have lost, in that defeat, their very identity as the nation of Israel, who don't know whether they will ever return to their homeland again, if their homes even still exist, and who, on top of all those troubles, have the assurances of a host of prophets that they have brought this ruination on themselves, and that they alone are responsible for it, because they have never been able to do what God asked them to do.

Then Ezekial reminds them that the very breath in their bodies came from God in the first place, and that if God chooses to resurrect what has died, well, the dead will be resurrected. Obviously, this is the reason why this passage shows up in lectionaries before Easter—because it is a forecast, so to speak, of the Easter events.

I haven't been thinking so much about Easter though; this year, as usual, I will be entirely surprised to find out that it's here already. But what I've been thinking of are dry bones and a song I heard on the radio recently.

Dry bones first. For Ezekiel, the dry bones are Israel's defeat and despair. Defeat and despair, of course, are not the exclusive property of Israel. And I think of how many of you have told me, in these past few months, how kind of hopeless you feel about the situation in the world. The violence around us seems to be growing all the time: there are more deaths in Iraq while there is less security at home. Whatever we once meant by the phrase "civil society", there seems to be less and less civility daily. I think one way, maybe, to conceive of this despair is that we are the dry bones in the valley of the dry bones. We can't see how things might be made better, and we have little hope of it, and there we are.

And then, alongside all that, there is my own life, all our lives. The job which hasn't turned out the way we wanted or which we haven't been able to get, the troubled relationship, some part of ourselves that we want to change but just can't seem to make a dent in, having to simply wait and wait while someone we love suffers their way toward death. These are more dry bones—the parts of our life that seem to be unchangeable, that we don't know how to fix or resolve, that we sit motionless in because we don't know how to move. The places in our lives where we feel no hope.

So. On another note entirely, I was listening, this past week, to a song by a group called Eddie from Ohio, and the song is about the theory of relativity. The chorus goes something like this:

Albert Einstein was never good at math

But he found time down a curving path

The faster you go the slower you grow the less that you have to fall

The faster you go the slower you grow until you weigh nothing at all

I think the author of the song rather likes the idea of staying young and becoming weightless. There's something in the words that makes me think

that what the author yearns for is a kind of transcendence through speed, the same way I might yearn for transcendence through mystical experience.

So the phrase that caught my attention doesn't necessarily bear any resemblance to the author's intention, but I still think it may be true. And that's the phrase, "the faster you go, the slower you grow." Physics-wise, I can't vouch for the truth of that statement, but it does seem to me that it's emotionally and spiritually true. The busier we are, the less opportunity for pause and reflection we take, well, the less we know about ourselves, the less we partake of authentic relationships, the more we stay on the surface of life. There is more richness to our lives, maybe, when we move more slowly through them, have the chance to deepen our connections to places and people, not merely broaden them.

Which is another dry bones place. I know I'm not alone in feeling that my life would be richer if it were less busy, because many of you tell me you feel that way, too. We talk about how little time we're able to make for the things that bring us joy, how often we simply rush from errand to chore to errand. Even if we feel a hunch, somewhere inside ourselves, that the faster we go, the slower we grow, we still can't slow down.

I struggle with the frustration and paradox of it. Maybe if I could just slow down a little, I could figure out how to slow down more, how to slow down enough that my life would have more meaning and joy for me, that I would have time for the love, the richness, and the new experience that deepness could bring me.

And this is another dry bones place: not only disliking the way we feel pressed, but feeling unable to make any changes to what oppresses us. And so we wait, disliking the circumstances we find ourselves in, feeling completely unable to change them.

Whatever our dry bones place is, we wait there in a paradox. This is the paradox: if we could do what we can't do, then we would finally be able to make the changes required in order to do what we can't do. If we could do

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It's hard to believe, but Ezekiel says, even stuck in that paradox, there's hope. If the dry bones themselves can't move, even so, God can move them. God can make the first move. God can bring them back to life.

I expect this was even harder for Ezekiel's audience to believe than it is for me to believe. Although it's hard for me to believe, and I know two things the Israelites didn't know. I know that, 60 years after the first Israelites were dragged off to Babylon, the political fortunes of the Near East shifted yet again, the Babylonians were replaced by the Persians as the dominant political force, and the Persians allowed the exiled Jews to return to their homeland. The bones unburied and knit back together.

Then, of course, there is the Easter story. Another place where we wait for the impossible, for what we ourselves cannot accomplish and then—there it is. Jesus does not come down from the cross, but rises from the dead, the Jesus movement is not defeated, the power of Jesus—God's power through Jesus—goes on despite the cross.

Even so, I am tempted to look at the dry bones and say, "This is hopeless. These bones can't be brought back to life." Because what I really don't want to believe is that I have to wait, and God will make the first move. I want to do something—about the world, about my life, about the circumstances I find myself in. Even when I don't know what to do, even when I can't think of a thing to do, it doesn't occur to me that the thing which would be most helpful to me is the only thing I can do anyway, and that's to wait. To wait, in conversation with God, which is prayer. No, I want to really do something. I want to be pro-active, not responsive. What's prayer, anyway? What's waiting, except another word for failure.

But there are those dry bones. Entirely helpless on their own, and then they take on breath. What is the point of that story, anyway?