In 587 B.C. the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by a powerful Babylonian army. It was the last stronghold of Israel. All was lost. Those who survived this onslaught were exiled -- scattered throughout the vast Babylonian empire. They had been forcibly separated from the people and places they treasured. This was intended to demoralize them, so there would be no fight left in them. And it worked. Many of those who had been taken into exile were dispirited. Their terrible ordeal had drained the life out of them. And they were bereft of any hope for the future.

It was for these exiles, who had been crushed in spirit, that God called the prophet Ezekiel. He sent him to proclaim a message to them that would restore their hope in the God who had power to renew their lives. God had prepared his prophet to deliver this message by giving him a vision. In this vision, he whisked Ezekiel off and plopped him down in a place that was filled with dry bones.

And God asked him this question: "Can these bones live?"

God provided his own answer to the question when he told Ezekiel to prophesy over those bones, to proclaim his word of promise, that he would bring them to life again. And as Ezekiel followed the Lord's command, those bones began to rattle; then they began to join together; then sinews, flesh and skin came upon them, transforming those dry bones into human bodies once again. Then God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the spirit, commanding the winds to come and breathe life into them. So this is what the prophet did. And to his utter amazement, that is what happened, so that before long, a vast army of people was standing before him, filled with life.

Finally, God explained the meaning of this vision to Ezekiel, which is found in today's first reading. "These bones are the whole house of Israel. They have been saying, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost . . . Go tell them, 'Thus says the Lord: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them . . . I will put my spirit upon you and you will live.'" This was the message God sent his prophet to proclaim to those who had been so drained of life that they had been wondering, "Can these bones live? Will I ever feel truly alive again?"

Now it seems that Mary and Martha were asking a similar question after suffering the death of their brother Lazarus. They loved him so much. They were so hopeful that he would recover, that their friend Jesus would come and make him well again. But instead, he had died, and they felt as though the life had drained out of them. And as so many do who find themselves in such a place, perhaps they too were wondering, "Can these bones live? Will I ever feel truly alive again?"

I think many of us have found ourselves in such a place -- that place where something happened that knocked the wind out of us -- that place where we had become dispirited, where we no longer felt alive. Perhaps it was a physical or mental illness that brought us there, or the loss of a job, or an addiction; the breakdown of an important relationship, or a public humiliation of some kind. There are many roads that lead to the valley of dry bones, where the things that once gave joy and meaning to life are gone, and we are left feeling lifeless and hopeless. It is a terrible place in which to find ourselves. And perhaps what is even more terrible than those feelings of lifelessness and hopelessness, is the awareness of how our being in that place impacts the lives of others -- especially those we love most.

I have a friend who has often spoken to me about what happened to his wife following the death of her sister. For many months following her sister's death, my friend's wife was constantly on his case about something or other. Though he tried extra hard to please her, nothing he did ever
seemed to be right. He was about at his wits end, almost ready to leave her. He just hadn’t realized what was happening until, after several months of being in this agonizing situation, someone suggested to him that perhaps his wife’s behavior had something to do with the death of her sister.

And this was in fact the case. She and her sister had been very close. And she had been overcome with grief. She had come into that place of dry bones, where the life goes out of us, where nothing seems good and pleasing. And though she knew she wasn’t responding to her husband as she should, she just couldn’t help it. She had found herself in a place in life where it seemed she had nothing more to give, where there was no joy to be found. And it affected everything she said and did. Once her husband came to understand this, he found it possible to stop taking things so personally, and to be a support to her, until she had passed through that dry and lifeless place -- something that his faith told him would surely come to pass by the grace of God. And it did. Of course, this is not just something that happens to women – it happens to men as well.

But though at times we may find ourselves in those places where we feel that the life has gone out of us, the good news proclaimed in the readings today is that God’s desire for us is not death, but life. God has created us for life. And no matter what it is that brought us into a place of lifelessness, God has the power to breathe new life into us – even in what might appear to be the most hopeless of circumstances.

In our readings throughout this Lenten season this has been a constant theme. As the Spirit of God breathed new life into the hopelessness of the primordial chaos, so he breathed it into Adam and Eve. God breathed new life into the hopelessness of Abraham and Sarah’s barrenness, into the hopelessness of the woman at the well’s unquenchable thirst for something better; into the hopelessness of the man born blind’s inability to see; into the hopelessness of the exiles in Babylonia, and into the hopelessness of the dead man Lazarus and his grieving sisters.

Into the hopelessness of all these situations, God sent forth his Spirit, and dry and lifeless bones came to life again; sin gave way to new possibilities for life, barrenness gave way to fruitfulness, thirst to satisfaction, blindness to sight, and death to new life.

It is essential that we remember these stories. That’s why they have been given to us. Because whether we like it or not, there are times when we are going to find ourselves in that valley of dry bones. God does not prevent us from coming into such places from time to time because it is important for us to learn the lessons that such places have to teach us – lessons that enable our lives to become richer and more fruitful.

Yet God will not leave us in such places forever. He has promised that if we remain open to him, he will breath into us his life-giving Spirit, and we will come alive again – more fully alive than ever before. “I am the resurrection and the life,” says Jesus, “whoever believes in me though they die, yet shall they live.” This promise God has made to us in Jesus, is a promise that God has made again and again in one form or another since the beginning of time. And it is the promise he speaks to us now. While we may find ourselves in places of death from time to time, God’s unwavering intention is to bring us to that place where we will have fullness of life forever.

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