

THE GRATEFUL DEAD

Sermon, April 2, 2017

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-44, Romans 8:5-11

We read in our Old Testament lectionary that Ezekiel was taken by the Spirit of the Lord to a valley filled with dry bones. The Lord asked Ezekiel, "*Son of man, can these bones live?*" Looking around at all those shattered, dry, lifeless skeletons, Ezekiel responds, "*Oh, sovereign Lord, You alone know.*" Then the Lord told Ezekiel to start preaching to the bones. God even gave Ezekiel the sermon to preach: "*Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you and you will come to life! Then you will know that I am the Lord.*"

When we've looked at this passage in years past, I mentioned If I were Ezekiel, I might have gently suggested the Lord first bring these bones back to life, and *then* I'd do a little preaching. "*See?*" I'd say, "*See what God can do? Seeing is believing, after all!*" More often than not, though, God simply does not work that way. God calls us to believe without seeing, and to step out on faith and speak and act on that belief ... *then* you'll "see." So there's Ezekiel, standing in the middle of that great valley filled with dead, dry, scattered bones. Maybe he's thinking, "*I've preached to some pretty dead congregations before, but this takes the cake.*" What does he say? "*Good morning, you bony ... er, bonnie people, it's good to see so many of you scattered ... er, gathered here today.*" No, he goes on to tell the dead, dry, scattered bones the message God gave Him: "*God is going to cause you to LIVE again. Don't give up hope, dry bones! You will enjoy life again. And you will know that God is God.*" And you know the rest of the story, as the old song goes: "*Dem bones, dem bones, dem dr-r-r-y bones ... toe bone connected to the foot bone, Foot bone connected to the leg bone, Leg bone connected to the knee bone, Knee bone connected to the thigh bone, Thigh bone connected to the back bone, the back bone connected to the neck bone, the neck bone connected to the head bone ...*" As Ezekiel preached the word of God, the bones responded. As Ezekiel preached the word of God, things "came together!" And the bones were resurrected into a mighty force.

There's a practical working principle here: God calls us to obey, God calls us to act, God calls us to speak even when it seems as hopeless as calling a valley full of dead, dry bones to action. Obey, **then** you will see! (BTW, *this is a principle we saw last week with the blind man ... it was after he responded in obedience to Jesus' directives that he was able to really see.*) Believing is seeing. Hope and faith in the power of God's word to bring life to seemingly hopeless situations ... that's what brings us back to life, that's what makes things "come together" for us. It is the loss of hope and faith that is so deadly. Hope chooses to believe in the power and goodness of a God who can bring new life even when everything seems dead and hope-less. Choose hope; don't choose despair. To choose despair is to just embrace the deadness that is there and say, "*It is always going to be like this.*" Hope ... biblical hope ... never looks just "at how it is," but at God's vision for how it can be. It is in believing, it is through the eyes of faith, we really begin to see. It is in believing that we have hope.

And Jesus said to Martha, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And whosever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die, but have life everlasting. Do you believe this?*" "Yes Lord," she told him. "*I believe. You are the Christ, the son of God*" And with that, Martha took off like a shot and ran home to her sister Mary, and I'm sure she was filled with HOPE that something good was about to happen.

(*This following illustration was edited out at the 10:30 service due to time restraints.*) When we looked at these texts six years ago, I told the story of how the children's program Sesame Street dealt with the real life death of one of its most popular human characters. Will Lee, the actor who played store proprietor Mr. Hooper, passed away. With his trademark bowtie and horned rimmed glasses, Mr. Hooper had been a popular part of the children's show since its inception thirteen years earlier (*and for thirteen years Big Bird never could properly pronounce the name of the proprietor who always provided Big Bird with his patented Birdseed milkshakes; he would often say, "Mr. Looper" and be corrected by one of the cast*). Mr. Hooper's departure posed a difficult question. Should the Children's Television Workshop deal at all with the subject of death? If so, how would they explain it to their estimated ten million viewers, most of whom are under the age of six? A staff writer described it this way: "*We asked ourselves: What do we want the kids to know? What can they absorb? What might open up things we can't answer? After all, we try to create boundaries around what we can safely teach without doing any damage.*"

Child-development experts and grief counselors were called in, and they provided some specific "don'ts" for dealing with death on the show so as not to unduly alarm and/or cause unnecessary fear and consternation to children. For example: "*Don't say Mr. Hooper got sick and died, because you don't always die when*

you get sick. Don't say he was old, because all children think their parents are old. Don't say he went to the hospital and died, because people go to the hospital all the time." They also advised the staff to avoid religious issues altogether, such as saying that Mr. Hooper had gone to heaven. (Now, on one hand, I understand; the audience of Sesame Street was large and varied greatly in religious belief or lack thereof. On the other hand, however, I have to respond, "What is left to say?") The producers decided they were going to just communicate a few basic messages. "He's gone ... acknowledge the reality." "He won't be back." "He'll be missed." "He will live on in your memory." They also wanted the cast to express how they felt about Will, and they wanted the children to know that death stimulates a full range of emotions, and that's OK ... you're sad, you're angry, you're frustrated, you're confused all at the same time. To their credit, they addressed this. But what struck me as a father and as a pastor is that they could offer no message of hope!

The show that resulted was Episode 1839 "Goodbye, Mr. Hooper", it aired on Thanksgiving Day 1983 so families could watch it together.¹ It was selected by the Daytime Emmys as being one of the Ten Most Influential Moments in daytime television. Big Bird walks on camera and says to the cast: "I just drew pictures of all my grown-up friends on Sesame Street and I'm going to give them to you." He passes out sketches and the cast members ooh and ahh over the likenesses. He's left with Mr. Hooper's picture. "I can't wait till Mr. Hooper ("Mr. HOOPER, Big Bird" Maria sighs) sees it," says Big Bird. "Say, where is he? I want to give it to him." Maria explains: "Big Bird, don't you remember? We told you ... Mr. Hooper died. He's dead." Big Bird says, "Oh yeah, I remember. Well ... I'll give it to him when he comes back." Another cast member, Olivia, gets up from her chair, touches Big Bird saying, "Big Bird, Mr. Hooper's not coming back." Big Bird asks, "Why not?" "Big Bird," she explains, "when people die, they don't come back." Big Bird: "He's never coming back?" Olivia: "Never." Big Bird: "Well I don't understand. You know, everything was just fine. I mean, why does it have to be this way? Give me one good reason." Olivia: "Big Bird, it has to be this way ... because." Big Bird: "Just because?" Olivia: "Just because." Big Bird: "Oh."

And that's true, Big Bird. They don't come back. *Unless ... they happen to be a friend of Jesus.* That, in a nutshell, is today's lesson and message of hope from the lectionary Scriptures.

I've lost count of how many times I have led or attended funeral services. When I look out at the tear-stained faces of the broken-hearted family and friends of the deceased, what do I say? Isn't there something more that can be said than, "He's gone. He won't be back. He'll be missed." I really do not think any of the sentimental words about loved ones living on in our hearts and memories is of much lasting comfort or help. But when we hear the promises of Jesus, "I am the Resurrection and the Life, he who believes in me shall never die, but have life everlasting. In my Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you. I go now to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, to receive you unto myself, that where I am, you may be also." Two things happen when people hear, really hear, these promises: First, they are reminded of a joyful, certain and *real* hope. Yes, we are sad for a time, but not forever! Second, if people are paying attention, they start to examine the lives they are living right now. Trust me on this ... death always comes too soon. And you cannot stare at a casket without asking yourself some ultimate questions. Such as, "Am I using my time well? Am I loving the people I have with me while I have this time? Am I making good memories that I can spend an eternity reminiscing about? Am I working for things that make an eternity of difference, or am I just pushing and fretting and striving for things that really don't matter?" The promise of Jesus and the promise of Easter is that there is life ... real life ... beyond the shadow we call death!

Believing is seeing. It is in believing, it is through the eyes of faith, that we really begin to see. It is in believing that we have hope. I entitled this sermon "The Grateful Dead," partially because I was reaching for a catchy title, but mainly because each of the lectionary texts this morning is about God's power to graciously give life to ones who were once dead ... a dead nation, Jesus' dead friend Lazarus, and all who once lived under the sentence of death ... all of whom are grateful for the gift of life. These readings affirm what happens when we take God at His word. Believing is seeing. Those who believe, see ... they see their lives change, they see their purpose reordered, they see things come together in their lives like never before, and they are given sure and certain and unshakeable hope. The God whose word revived Israel's dry bones, the God whose living Word called forth Lazarus from the grave, the God who raised Jesus from the grave, is the same God whose living Spirit empowers and sustains us and gives us hope in the day we have. And He is the same God who will one day call all of us by name and give us life beyond life, life that will never, ever know death again.

As Jesus said to Martha, He says to us, "Do you believe this?" May we answer with gratitude in our hearts as Martha answered, "Yes Lord, I believe."

¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxj4Tk83xQ>