**Bone Dry**

**4-4-21**

He is Risen! He is Risen, indeed!

* Risen, resurrected, revitalized, revived, reanimated.
  + That which was dead, lifeless, stone cold.
  + Now energized, vital, hot-blooded.
* That’s the story of Easter. But is that the story of Christ’s church?

It’s Easter Sunday – but you know what folks? I’m dry…bone dry.

* This past year has sucked all the life right out of me.
  + Easter was taken from us last year, as it took place on the third week of the lockdown – just enough time to have figured out Zoom.
  + And that’s kind of when it all began – no, that’s not right.
    - That’s when it all began to be revealed.
    - The weaknesses of our faith, the cracks in our fellowship, the shallowness of our understanding, the vulnerability of our love.
  + For the first time in my lifetime the church in America came under real duress.
    - And I’m not sure we have fared well.
    - For a year later we find ourselves smaller, more divided, and more distracted than ever before.
  + As evidence of the reality of this, a poll came out this week – a poll that has been taken year after year for decades – about church affiliation in America.
    - In 1999, it had shown that 70% of Americans said they were a part of a church.
      * Today, just 22 years later, that number, for the first time in our lifetimes dropped below 50 %.
      * In fact, we’ve been losing about 1% per year for about two decades now.
  + Shortly after reading that I watched an interview with yet another prominent worship leader and musician who has publicly abandoned the faith.
    - He was ever so articulate, so likeable, and so honest.
    - Previously he had written several memorable songs – deep and passionate songs of faith.
    - But now, after having grown up in the church with faithful parents and a blessed upbringing, he renounced his faith.
      * No great sin involved; no lifestyle issues, no political agenda or anger with God.
      * Just a faith with a brittle foundation crumbling under the weight of the world.
    - Which led me to other videos – angry videos.
      * Videos of believers angrily and very personally attacking others in the church as false teachers and apostate.
        + Site after site after site of vitriol and ever so arrogant, self-indulgent condemnation of name after name after name.
        + Ministry after ministry after ministry.
      * Not that there aren’t false teachers out there or false doctrines or bad actors.
        + There are.
      * But the lack of introspection was deplorable.
        + It was all about “them”, but never about “us”.
        + It was all about false doctrines luring people away from true faith, but never about a church not living into the true doctrines that we know so well.
        + And not a word was spoken about how it was the “faithful church” that was responsible for producing the brittle faith of this young worship leader or the environment that spawned the living contradiction was Ravi Zacharias.
      * Oh yeah, there was THAT this past year too.
* You might have thought what dried me out was Covid and lockdowns and summer protests and riots and the incredibly divisive election season.
  + But while none of that was enriching or life-giving.
  + What brings me to this Easter bone dry is mostly the response of the church to all of this.
    - Rather than demonstrating faithfulness, enduring love, boundless compassion, and a willingness to lay down our lives for our friends.
    - We have taken on the face and the attitudes of the world – many times being practically indistinguishable from it.
  + And frankly, I am grieved almost to the point of despair – bone dry…used up…wasted and discouraged.
* But why would I share this lament on this day of all days?
  + Why would I choose Easter as the time to share feelings that are more appropriate to Good Friday?
    - Because, friends, as a people we have forgotten Good Friday!
    - Oh, we haven’t forgotten the death of Jesus.
      * Though most of us don’t consider it something worth gathering to remember anymore.
    - But we have forgotten that Good Friday is also about OUR death.
      * Or, as Paul says in Romans 6:

*3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

* + - * But as a people, we desire resurrection without death.
      * We want all the benefits of the new life without ever having to let go of the old one.
  + So this year, I want to be honest and ask the question: where is the joy of resurrection if there is no recognition of the fact that we were – that we are, apart from Christ, dead?
    - * If we continually refuse to acknowledge our need for salvation, then why should we go through the motions of celebrating it?
* This was a problem in the Old Testament as well.
  + The nation of Israel, and then Judah, continued to enjoy their religiosity without tending to their actual relationship with God.
    - You can read all about it in the Old Testament prophets, who God sent to them to call them back to Himself.
    - But since they were faithfully practicing the form of their religion, they refused to see that they had wandered from their covenant with God.
      * Sure they practiced the sacrifices and gave their tithes…
      * But they showed no compassion for the poor, no care for the widow, and no hospitality to the foreigner.
      * Instead, they were arrogant and bellicose and sought to expand their own importance and power in the world around them.
  + For generations God sent them prophets to remind them of their covenant with Him, who promised to care for them as His people as they walked with Him as their God.
    - * But Who also promised that if they were to forsake Him, He would withdraw His hand of blessing and protection.
      * And finally, by the days of Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet, these curses of the covenant were being fulfilled.
      * And Jeremiah lamented it – in fact, he wrote an entire book of laments over the death of the nation.
      * We find it in the Scriptures as the book of Lamentations.
        + A book of vivid brokenness and honest grief as Jeremiah watches all that He had prophesied come to pass.
        + Surely, it would have been easy for Him to simply slip into despair and hopelessness.
        + Yet, He doesn’t. And he tells us why in chapter 3:21-26

*21 But this I call to mind,* (he wrote)

*and therefore I have hope:*

*22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;*

*his mercies never come to an end;*

*23 they are new every morning;*

*great is your faithfulness.*

*24 “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,*

*“therefore I will hope in him.”*

*25 The Lord is good to those who wait for him,*

*to the soul who seeks him.*

*26 It is good that one should wait quietly*

*for the salvation of the Lord.*

* + And what does this salvation look like?
    - For that we have to look to another prophet – this one living in the middle of exile in Babylon.
    - By this time, Jerusalem is destroyed, the Temple is no more, and much of the nation has been taken into captivity and was living in Babylon.
    - But God continued to send prophets to His people – even in captivity.
* The passage we read earlier was from the prophet Ezekiel, who lived in Babylon among the exiles there.
  + For years the exiles there in Babylon refused to believe that Judah, as a nation was dead.
    - They had listened to false prophets who had told them this was a short-term, temporary situation.
    - They believed they would soon return home.
  + But after the destruction of the Temple of God and the tearing down of Jerusalem’s wall, all hope was lost.
    - They believed they were dead.
    - And it was only after this realization that God gave Ezekiel a new vision – a vision of resurrection.

The vision begins in a vast valley, much like our own here in the Treasure Valley, whose valley floor is filled with bones – very dry bones.

* To the Jews at the time, they would recognize the image as a reference to the covenant curses that indicated that should the people be unfaithful to God, they would suffer loss.
  + Decades before, Jeremiah warned in Jeremiah 34:17-20

*The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction, but will flee from them in seven, and you will become a thing of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your carcasses will be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away.*

* + - Carcasses picked clean and left unburied on the floor of the valley – just as Ezekiel envisions it now.
    - In fact, God tells Ezekiel in vs. 11.

*“Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’*

* + Friends, resurrection cannot come until there is a recognition that we are dead apart from God.
    - This is why our relationship with God – not our service to him – is our highest calling.
    - This is why when bordering on despair in his lament, Jeremiah declares that he has hope not because of what God has done but rather in God Himself.

*24 “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,*

*“therefore I will hope in him.”*

* Well, this very same God now asks Ezekiel, *“Son of man, can these bones live?”*
  + Now Ezekiel doesn’t say that he chuckled, but I can imagine a spontaneous guffaw.
    - Though his verbal response shows a realistic faith.
      * “God only knows!”
  + So God commands Ezekiel to do that which seems on the surface to be pointless.

*“Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.*

* + - There are no ears here, just skull and crossbones.
    - This makes St. Francis preaching to the birds seem sensible.
    - For there is nothing more dead that dried up, marrowless bones that have been laying in a desert valley for decades.
  + But Ezekiel obeys and prophesies to the bones:

*5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 And I will lay sinews upon 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.”*

* + - Senseless words, crazy words, unbelievable words.
      * This isn’t a kid pulled out of a freezing lake revived 20 minutes after his heart stops.
      * This is the reconstitution of a humanity broken down to its most inert state.
        + Not mostly dead; dead dead.
  + But as Ezekiel is speaking there is a great sound of rattling as the bones in the valley begin to come together and at the sound of his voice the word of the Lord comes to pass.
    - So now, instead of a valley full of dry bones, we have a valley full of…well, dead bodies.
      * A miracle, sure – but a pointless one.
      * For Ezekiel tells us:

*8 And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.*

* + - Amazing, yes! But what good is a body if there is no breath in it!
      * In our world, that’s what we bury!
    - But I fear that this is the essence of the faith of many believers today.
      * We pray a prayer to “get saved”, but never breathe in the breath of God.
      * Instead, we breathe in the spirit of this age and take on its priorities, its attitudes and its ways.
        + So, in the example of our young musician, we make him a celebrity and place him on a pedestal because he has a nice voice and amazing talent.

This leads him to go on tour so we can all go listen to him sing, not realizing that life on tour will separate him from the life of the church.

So in this interview, he mentions that in 15 years of touring, he seldom worshipped in the same place with the same people.

This meant that there was no consistency in his discipleship and his faith became the way he made his living.

But later, when his living was no longer dependent upon his faith, he had very little faith left to lean on.

* + - * + It’s a little harder to define with Ravi Zacharias since he was never interviewed after his double life was discovered.

But again, we made a celebrity out of him, consistent with the worlds sense of priorities and importance.

We placed a higher value on knowledge than on personal integrity and depth of relationship.

And again, a consistent, long-term connection to a particular body of Christ was absent and along with it the accountability that goes with long-term relationships.

* + - Friends, the world is teaming with breathless dead bodies going from distraction to distraction in order to avoid the reality of their own lifelessness.
      * Why would we, as Christ’s church, choose to emulate that?
      * For there is a real and full resurrection available to us.
* Ezekiel continues:

*9 Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”* *10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.*

* + Now many of you already know that the Hebrew word here translated as “breath” actually can mean “breath”, “wind”, or “spirit”.
    - It is the context in which we find it that decides how it will be translated.
    - The same is true in New Testament Greek as well.
  + Here we find that this resurrection is not complete until the breath is infused into the reconstituted bodies.
* But what is this breath? God, himself, tells us:

*13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. 14* ***And I will put my Spirit within you****, and you shall live,*

* + This breath that animates the restored bodies of the dead is nothing less than the Spirit of God.
    - The very breath of God breathed into Adam at creation.
    - Breathed into the dead in Ezekiel’s vision.
    - Breathed by Jesus into the disciples in John 20:22

*22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.*

* + - And breathed into the church at Pentecost with the sound of a “mighty rushing wind”.
* Now this is a resurrection worth celebrating.
  + Amazing things had happened – noteworthy things; miraculous things – earlier in Ezekiel’s vision.
    - But nothing of significance. Nothing of consequence.
      * Dead bodies, no matter how good they look are still just dead bodies.
    - The resurrection is incomplete until the bodies are infused with the Spirit of God.
      * Then they stand up, together, a vast army.

My lament for the church this Easter Sunday is that we have the form of life, but so often lack the breath of life.

* But the good news is this:

*11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.*

* + But in order receive the breath of God, we need to draw near to Him.
    - You see, we act as if God breathes his life into us and then we good to go.
      * But I think a better picture is that God is continually breathing His breath into us.
    - Jeremiah put it this way when He spoke of God “being His portion”.
      * That is, is source of life and sustenance.
    - Well, in the context of our message today, the Lord is our respirator.
      * Because the truth is, the church is always in danger of suffocating if we stray away from the One who breathes His life into us, breath by breath.

So, this Easter, while we celebrate the resurrection, let’s commit to walking in the resurrection.

* Let us choose to draw near to the One who breathes life into us, recognizing that we have no breath in ourselves.
  + But that it is only by His Spirit that we are alive in Christ.