

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 22, 2026

Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (Old Testament Reading)

Other Texts: Romans 8:1-11 (Epistle); John 11:1-45 (Gospel)

“The Dead Raised to Life”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Ezekiel’s vision of the valley full of bones is one of the best known parts of a book that is otherwise not very well known by many Christians (an encouragement for all of us to take the time to read it, or read it again.¹ In this vision, the hand of LORD (Yahweh) sets Ezekiel down in the valley filled with bones that have been scattered and they completely dry, no longer strong, but brittle, easily fractured, without a hint of life, useless, dead. Strange indeed, but we are not left wondering to whom the bones refer.

The LORD declares, “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.’”² Their lament seemed rather accurate. The northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by Assyria for about a 150 years. And just recently those who were already exiles in Babylon from earlier deportations heard the report from a fugitive who had evaded the invading army, “The city has been struck down.”³ And so it was that the southern kingdom of Judah was no more as well.

It was a surprise to them; a total shock. They had once said, “Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess.”⁴ Yet now the nation, the city, the temple, all gone. It was a surprise to them; a total shock. For prophets, right up to the end, had proclaimed that Jerusalem would never fall, that the LORD would never let His temple be destroyed. And the people believed the word the prophets spoke. There was only one problem; they were false prophets.⁵ And faith, no matter how strong, no matter how sincere, when it is in a lie can only bring death and destruction.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the beginning of this vision, the valley filled with the litter of dried up, dead bones scattered, puts into perspective what is written in our Epistle, “to set the mind on the flesh is death”⁶ and again, just a few verses after the reading, “if you live according to the flesh you will die.”⁷ Every sin in our lives is like a seed of death which the sinful nature plants within our hearts and minds. All our deadly. But when a sin is followed, regularly acted upon, excused, defended, then it is flagrant idolatry. In these situations the seed of death, being watered and fertilized by consciously choosing sin against God’s Word and

¹ Some lay-friendly resources are *The Lutheran Study Bible* and *The People’s Bible Commentary: Ezekiel*, both available from Concordia Publishing House.

² Ezekiel 37:11. All quotes are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

³ Ezekiel 33:21.

⁴ Ezekiel 33:24.

⁵ E.g. Hananiah who opposed Jeremiah (Jeremiah 28).

⁶ Romans 8:6.

⁷ Romans 8:13.

conscience, is no longer a sin of weakness, but a mortal sin which destroys faith, a sin that dries the soul out, leaving nothing more than a dried pile of bones where a child of God once was.

What a warning it is to us believers still today when we see the spiritual graveyard of the once believing nation. They believed the lie that if they went through the required external religious ceremonies, the state of their heart didn't matter, nor the words they spoke nor the actions they committed outside of those ceremonies. They believed the lie that God doesn't actually judge sin; that He will not act on His threats.

And still today we have false prophets and teachers who proclaim, "Grace! Grace!" They guarantee that the threats of the Law no longer are a concern to us since Christ has fulfilled the Law. They promise that since Christ died for all then all will be saved, or else His blood was shed in vain which could never be true. They comfort us with a message that since faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit and God promises to preserve us, then faith can never be lost or God has failed to keep His promise which could never be true. They assure us that since works cannot save us, then a person can continue in sin and will still be saved otherwise we would be saved by works.

Truly these false gospels scratch many an itching ear, but they are ears of the flesh, the sinful nature, which desires lies over the truth of God's Word. But these lies that can bring only death and destruction, in life and eternity, for their source is the Father of Lies,⁸ the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name is Abaddon, destruction, and Apollyon, the destroyer.⁹

"Son of man, can these bones live?"¹⁰ If anyone else asked the question, if only natural processes were involved, the answer would be a resounding, "No way!" But it was not just anyone who was asking, but the LORD, the almighty creator. Yet, Ezekiel does not assume God's will, but responds in humble faith, "O Lord GOD, you know."¹¹ And this is a good example for us: to not assume God's will and thereby put Him to the test, even if unintentionally. Instead we stick to His revealed will in the Bible like superglue, and then where His will is uncertain, we humble ourselves before Him in prayer, seeking His guidance and blessing saying, "Not mine, but Your will be done."

And yet how awesome God's will is, especially His gracious will as Ezekiel witnesses in the vision. For even as sin kills, so the Lord can give life even to the dead. Certainly this is seen in the giving of physical life, as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. A glorious miracle indeed, proving that Jesus is the resurrection and the life just as He said to grieving Martha.¹² Yet, the vision goes much further than mere physical life.

When Ezekiel prophesied as first commanded, the scattered, dried up bones came together with a great rattling sound, and sinews, flesh, and skin covered them, yet there was no breath in them. But it must be noted that in Hebrew, the words breath, wind, and Spirit are all *the same word*, "ruach" (רוּחַ). And this takes us into the deep truth of this vision.

⁸ Cf. John 8:44.

⁹ Revelation 9:11.

¹⁰ Ezekiel 37:3a.

¹¹ Ezekiel 37:3b. While LORD is a translation of Yahweh, in this case the word translated as Lord is Adonai, which means "lord, master." The word translated as GOD in this case is Yahweh, otherwise we'd have the translation Lord LORD. But the actual Hebrew would be most correctly translated as "Lord Yahweh."

¹² John 11:25.

When God made Adam, He formed His body, bones, sinews, flesh, and skin, from the dust of the earth. But Adam did not become a living being until the Lord breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Sounds similar, but the Hebrew word breath is different here. In other words, physical and spiritual life were given at the same time. But since the Fall, physical life and spiritual life are not fully connected. A person can have physical life, but be spiritually dead, just as Ezekiel saw when the bones were brought together and covered with sinews, flesh, and skin. In fact, as Scripture teaches, that is the state of all humanity, you and me, from conception: physical life, but not spiritual life. To receive spiritual life, the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, must enter in. For without Him, humanity is but an empty husk of flesh, a mere caricature of the life God would give us, as prove by it ending in eternal death.

But when God breathes the breath of His Spirit into us, the caricature is gone and real life begins. Being born from above, born of water and the Spirit, true life, that is, being alive to God in our spirit, is ours. We are no longer hunks of flesh that live for the flesh of the sinful nature, but new creations, living according to the Spirit by setting our minds on the on the things of the Spirit.¹³ And receiving the Spirit we are raised as a mighty army, the Church Militant, serving as Christ's soldiers, battling against the devil and the forces of darkness, against the unbelieving world, and against the sinful flesh that still hangs on us. Battling until we are the army at rest and peace, the Church Triumphant, each of us a member of the victorious host from every nation, tribe and people around the throne of God and the Lamb.¹⁴

Dear Christians, sin kills. There is no sin that does not harm us and impenitent sin destroys us eternally. In the Old Testament, to be left unburied was a sign of God's curse upon the deceased, an indicator of eternal condemnation. To see the bones of the house of Israel in such a state is a stark warning that there is quite a difference between being a sinner in this life who is repentant, confessing sin and in the power of the Holy Spirit fighting sin, and the sinner in this life who is impenitent and willfully continues in sin. This difference makes the difference between eternal destinations.

But God would not see the sinner die! He restored Israel to the Judah as He promised, because there, from that land, He would bring the Savior for them and the whole world, again just as He promised. The Savior, Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man, who takes their sin, our sin, the whole world's sin, upon Himself. Takes it to the cross and dies, so that we who are still born in sin could be given spiritual life. The Holy Spirit, who is the Lord and giver of life, comes to us, creates faith in us and our spirit breathes, living unto God. A life in the soul that leads to the fullness of life of body and soul in the new heavens and earth.

But the vision reminds us that the Spirit's work of giving life to the dead happens through the Word as pictured by Ezekiel's prophesying. Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ for the Word is Spirit and life!¹⁵ Where there is no Word, there is no spiritual life. Where the Word does not continue to be heard the breath of the Spirit leaves the person's spirit, and all that is left is the empty husk of flesh once more.

¹³ Romans 8:5b.

¹⁴ Revelation 7:9.

¹⁵ Romans 10:17; John 6:63.

Through His Word and Holy Spirit, God who gave us natural life has given us true and full life, *spiritual* life, the life that lasts forever. So let us with all diligence keep turning from the sin that kills and, instead, continue hearing His Word, keeping it in faith and faithful obedience, and so live the life of the children of God in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen!