

# “Wow!”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
20 April 2014  
Easter and Passover Sunday

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## **Reading**            “The Valley of Dry Bones” from *Ezekiel* 37:1-10

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.

He led me all around them;  
there were very many lying in the valley,  
and they were very dry.

He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?”  
I answered, “O Lord God, you know.”

Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones,  
and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.  
Thus says the Lord God to these bones:  
“I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

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.”

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.

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.

Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath,  
prophecy, 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.”

I prophesied as he commanded me,  
and the breath came into them, and they lived,  
and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

### **Sermon: “Wow!”**

As visions go, Ezekiel’s “Valley of Dry Bones” is hard to beat.  
And it’s rather hard to forget.

Its graphic images have stuck with me since childhood—  
thanks to the illustrated Bible I was given in kindergarten.

I’m not sure I was really old enough at the time for such things...,  
but what vividly remains in my mind all these years later  
is a picture of a wide valley, stretching out as far as the eye can see,  
filled waist-high with piles of bones, bleached white by the sun.

I think it might’ve been for the best that my Bible didn’t include  
an image of those dry bones once they began  
to connect and rattle and dance around.

You have to admit, the scene is a little disturbing—  
like something out of a bad zombie apocalypse movie!

Yet, there’s so much more to this passage.

So often, with stories from ancient scriptures, people wonder whether  
the outrageous thing that’s purported to have happened really happened.

The thing is, that misses the point, because ancient scriptures  
are full of stories about astounding things that are still happening today.

The question we must ask about stories from ancient texts isn't, "did it happen?", but "what does it mean?"

Now, to really understand this particular scene and its deeper meaning, we need to unpack a bit of the historical context behind this strange story.

Ezekiel, the star of the text, was a young priest among the Jewish people, sent, along with 3,000 or so other educated elites, into exile in Babylon in the year 586 before the Common Era.

That's the year Jerusalem finally fell to the invading Babylonians.

After years of holding the city under siege, the armies of Nebuchadnezzar II swiftly lay waste to everything in sight.

The splendid temple built by Solomon was destroyed; the people were scattered in all directions, and their culture strategically diluted to undermine any chance of a rebellion.

The Jewish Diaspora, so born out of violence, took shape almost overnight, forever changing the course of history.

During the years of exile that followed, Ezekiel, suddenly a priest without a temple, stood in the role of prophet to his people, now all strangers in a strange land.

As prophets are required to do, he had great, mystical visions concerning God's judgment which he freely shared with those with him in exile, as well as with those few who remained back in Israel.

In truth, he would share his visions with anyone who would listen. An essential part of being a prophet, after all, is relentlessly sharing what you see.

But while he often railed against the sins of his people, he also spoke of restoration, of promise, and hope.

The valley of dry bones is, perhaps, the most famous of his visions.

To those in his day with ears to hear,  
the bones themselves would have instantly brought to mind  
the memory of the countless people killed  
during the sacking of Jerusalem only a few years before.

The vision conjured the dismembered remains of a generation.  
A vast field of waste, an immense garden of grief.

*“I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.”*

How vital such a promise must have been,  
when death and despair were felt at every turn.

How comforting such words must have sounded—  
and how comforting such words must sound *even still*—  
to a people—to *any* people— for whom all hope has been lost.

In his poem, “Bone,” the poet Dempsey Calhoun has recast Ezekiel’s vision  
with language that cuts to the heart of the story’s enduring message.

Bone lay scattered and artifactual  
Wind-rowed like dead branches  
Whose tree bodies repeat the desiccation  
All hope bleached and lost  
Living moisture evaporated

Calcified memories of what was  
Or seeds of what could be  
Wandering shards of vessels  
That once thrummed with pure energy  
Where honour and dishonour wrestled

Stripped of living water to walk the hills  
Needing only gravity to line the valley

It was never about the bones anyway  
Rather, a glimpse of pure power  
A reminder of who’s in charge of restoration  
Real hope lies in the Source.

In those last lines—which speak to the yearning

for life to come again when and where so much has been lost—  
there is a note of hope.

It's rooted in the recognition  
of our complete dependence on forces  
so often and so far beyond our own power  
to bring about the renewal or rebirth we, at times, so desperately seek.

Our deep human need, from time to time, to have life breathed into us.

The name most frequently given to those forces down through the ages  
has been God, but there are other names, I believe,  
we can also use to describe the forces that are at play,  
the powers that have brought us into being.

My favourite is simply grace.

For we are players in a story that began with a big bang,  
transforming stardust into everything that we are,  
everything that we know, everything that we love.

And so we are dependent on an astonishing chain of events,  
marked by mystery and miracles we are only beginning to comprehend.

We live in a universe we did not create.

We are heirs to a gift as solid as granite  
and as fragile as the breath we just took.  
A gift we did nothing to deserve.  
An unimaginable gift of grace.

And, yet, one of the hardest facts of our existence  
is that the great and ancient efforts that have brought us into being  
do not spare us from suffering, from heartache, from loss, or from death.

Our being human makes us in no way immune to despair;  
if anything, it gives us a front row seat—best one in the house.

Terrible things happen upon this good green earth.  
Sometimes over and over again.

War, famine, and disease  
have been humanity's almost constant companions.

From the very beginning, we've known valleys of dry bones.

Today, they can be found in every corner of the globe.

They're most easily spotted, of course,  
in the killing fields of history's warring nations,  
but with just a bit of careful attention, they can be as readily found  
in natural landscapes mined over and exploited for their precious resources,  
in economic systems built to ensure inequality,  
and in human structures that perpetuate a world of injustice.

And, truth be told, those valleys of despair  
aren't only to be found out there, far from our everyday.

Vast valleys of dry bones  
can also be found very close to home—  
in the arid, parched places in our own hearts,  
in broken relationships,  
and in lives devoid of any real signs of life.

To live is to know such valleys.

It's no surprise that in the face of all that destruction, all that despair,  
that most enduring of human questions bubbles up within us  
asking whether the dry bones we see before us can ever live.

I believe the heart of our hearts longs  
for the answer to be an emphatic yes.

There is something deep within us  
that wants to behold life breathed into being all around us.

That's the profound hope found in the Christian promise of resurrection:  
that the faithful will rise again in glory to life eternal.

On this Easter morning,  
I must tell you that our faith makes a much more modest claim.

Our theology, by and large, doesn't look  
to the future bodily resurrection of those who died in faith.

But I believe we do look to the very real possibility  
of resurrection happening in the here and now.

I've seen it happen, and so have some of you.  
Breath where once there were only dry bones.  
Life where there was once death.  
Hope where there was despair.

Last month while I was on sabbatical, I was in San Francisco  
and late one afternoon, I made a pilgrimage I make every time I'm there  
to the AIDS Memorial Grove in Golden Gate Park,  
a quiet, sunken garden set aside  
to commemorate those who have died from the disease.

As I descended the path from street level,  
I found myself in a small forest of evergreens.

Among the base of these trees,  
a memorial has been created of smooth stones  
forming what looks like a dry, but misplaced creek bed.

On closer inspection, it became clear that the names  
of people who have died are inscribed on many of the stones.

In that moment of realization, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the sense  
that I was stumbling through a valley of dry bones.

And I began to cry as I never have before.  
I sobbed and couldn't stop.

My mind was flooded with the names and faces  
of the many friends I have buried through the years.

In those dry bones scattered at my feet, I could see my beloved ghosts,  
the many gay men of my generation and the one before it who are gone—  
and who have now, to my amazement,  
been gone for twenty, twenty-five, almost thirty years.

Wave after wave of grief—grief that I have spent the last two decades of my life processing and unpacking—washed over me.

As I cried, I leaned into the cleft of a redwood tree, steadying myself through a catharsis like I've never known before.

I was in a place where I felt free to cry with complete abandon, and so I did.

I figured if anyone found me there, of all places, in that state, they would likely understand.

Eventually, mixed in with the flood of memories, were thoughts of the many articles I've read in recent months describing the sea-change underway in the field of HIV/AIDS.

It seems we are finally, finally!, nearing a threshold where this disease can be treated more effectively than ever before, and where transmissions can be radically reduced.

While too many people will still become infected and far too many die because of unequal access to treatment, my heart was broken open with an immense feeling of gratitude for having lived to see a day I thought would never come.

I felt a glimmer of this in 1996, when the drug cocktail introduced that year began to dramatically reduce deaths and prolong lives.

I was the director of a small AIDS organization in Boston at the time.

It was a revolution—so much so, that I spent the balance of my time on staff there consolidating the organization's functions within larger non-profits in the city. We were going out of business.

While I was thinking through all of that, there against that great tree, my tears at last began to subside.

That is, until I looked out beyond the stones, to a clearing in the trees, where two teenagers were playing Frisbee in the field.

There was life there in that garden of grief.

That's when the waterworks started up again,  
as it dawned on me that these kids,  
who were blessedly oblivious to the meaning of this landscape all around them,  
weren't even alive in 1996, let alone 1981.

As I dried my eyes, and caught my breath,  
I felt for the first time in my adult life  
that there was life being breathed into a valley of dry bones  
where I've spent so much of the past two and a half decades.

On the way out, I caught sight of one last rock,  
this one with the words: L'chaim – To Life!

*"...and the breath came into them, and they lived,  
and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."*

L'chaim, indeed.

That night, I sent a text message to Bob telling him about my day.  
I probably too casually mentioned the crying and the catharsis.  
He was a little worried about me, but I told him not to be,  
for I had just had one of the most life-affirming, love-filled afternoons of my life.

I deep encounter with grace  
through which I had glimpsed a valley of despair beginning to blossom.

Friends, in this bittersweet existence,  
let us be ever on the lookout for the signs of resurrection  
to be found all around us.

Moments when we catch our breath for the gift that it is.

When valleys once devoid of life come into full-bloom.

When dry bones—even our own—at long last, breathe and dance—to life,  
and we are filled we wonder, with wow, with yes!

L'chaim!