

## Sermon: Can These Bones Live?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 22, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Can these bones live? That was the question posed by James Carroll, an American author, historian, and former Catholic priest, in his inaugural sermon as a priest. He was facing a room full of Air Force officers in full uniform, during the height of the Viet Nam War, not too long after the Battle of Khesanh in 1968.

Violating the liturgical calendar of the day, Carroll deliberately chose the passage of Ezekiel 37, the Valley of Dry Bones, *“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.”* (Ezekiel 37:1)

He chose this evocative passage not for the mythical vision of the prophet, nor to address the House of Israel as the text explicitly states so. He chose it on the account of news, not many weeks prior, describing exactly the same frightful scene in the valley below a besieged hilltop of Khesanh. Ten thousand men had been killed in a matter of weeks. Of course, that was only a microcosm of a much larger killing field, where over the course of the war, a million Vietnamese perished, whose bones were mostly scorched by the indiscriminate bombing campaign conducted by the U.S. Air Forces.

This is what Carroll wrote, reflecting on that first sermon he preached: “Can these bones live?” I asked in my excursus, repeating Ezekiel’s refrain. “Dried and burned by time.” I said, “and by desert wind, by the sun and most of all”—I paused, knowing the offence it would be to use a word that tied the image to the real, the one word I must never use in this church, never use with them—“by napalm.” It was as specific as I dare to get—or as I needed to. No one but opponents of the war referred to the indiscriminately dropped gelatinous gasoline that adheres to flesh and smoulders indefinitely, turning death into torture or leaving wounds impossible to treat. Napalm embodied the perversion of the Air Force, how “Up we go into the wild blue yonder” had become the screeches of children.

There was a sick silence in the chapel which only deepened when I repeated, "Can these bones live?" Only now the meaning was, "Can they live after what you have done?"

It was a powerful moment for Carroll the preacher, for the first hearers in that chapel, and for readers like myself who gleaned his words from Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary on Ezekiel, as edited by Margaret S. Odell. When I first read his account, I was instantly brought to tears, not for the carnage of the Vietnam War (which took place before I was born, though I certainly was aware of the struggle of that generation, with the anti-war protest that eventually turned the tide of public opinion against the war, and finally put a stop to it). No, it wasn't because of that. I was brought to tears, because the courage of that lone preacher, daring the speak the truth of God, guided by the Holy Scripture, in Ezekiel 37, one of the most memorable and evocative passage of the whole book, the Valley of Dry Bones.

Can these bones live? In Ezekiel's vision, this question was actually posed by the Lord God, a curious question at that. A valley full of dry bones suggests a battlefield slaughter where the losing side was defeated so totally and overwhelmingly, that there were no one left to pick up the dead.

What we do know, as the text states so subsequently, these dry bones represents the House of Israel in the 6th century BC, whose kingdom was toppled, whose capital city was burned, whose temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, whose way of life was shattered, and whose hope was all but gone. The remnants of that defeated people were captured and exiled, where by the river of Babylon they sat down and wept, as they remembered the former glory of Zion. They asked, "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" How could we ever sing again the songs of Zion?

It is against such backdrop of death and despair, the Lord God put to the prophet, "Mortal, can these bones live?" The answer, to most mortals limited by the reality of the inescapable mortality, should have been a resounding 'No!' No, my Lord, these bones cannot live! They have been long dead.

What kind of question is this? How cruel must you be in the face of our utter helplessness and hopelessness? We are no strangers to death. I am not speaking of our own death, and should that happens, there really aren't anything more we can say about it. No, I am referring to those 'little death', that foreshadow our last death and reveal how we are dying on a

regular basis, even in the midst of our living. I am speaking of the death of a dream, death of a way of life, death of a marriage, or even the death of hope.

Hope, when it dies, it dies slowly as despair sets in. The despair that eats at you, chews on you, toys with you as it eventually consumes you. When hope dies, it is impossible to rekindle. We are left helpless but to watch and to lament. No my Lord, these bones cannot live!

Yet, the prophet responded with, oh how could I describe it, a cryptic reply, saying, “O Lord God, you know.” O Lord God, you know. The 2nd person singular address of ‘you’ is emphatic to the 2nd person singular verb of ‘you know’. A better translation to this reply would be: “O Lord God, you yourself and only you alone know”

Biblical commentators have differing takes on such a cryptic reply. Odell describes the prophet’s response as a tacit acknowledgement of his own failure. After all, it was the biblical prophet job to prevent such a tragedy, to head off such total devastation from happening in the first place. However, I am more in agreement with Zimmerli’s observation, as ‘encompassing both human failure and divine possibility’, as Jesus once said to his disciples on the subject of salvation, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26)

Once the prophet acknowledges this divine possibility, God proceeds to command Ezekiel to ‘prophesy to those bones’ (Ezk 37:4). Now preaching to emptying pews is a nightmare all preachers dread. Imaging being commanded by the Lord God to preach to a bunch of long-dead bones. Who is going to hear this ‘words of the Lord’? Isn’t it a bit too little, too late?

Nevertheless, the prophet faithfully prophesied by proclaiming life, or the possibility of life, in the midst of death, in the valley of dry bones. And beyond anyone’s wildest imagination, bit by bit, bone by bone, ligament by ligament, “they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.” (Ezk 37:10)

Yet the job is not done, for this ghoulish host has not breath, no spirit in them. So the Lord God commanded the prophet, once again, to ‘prophesy to the breath’. The Hebrew word for breath is *ruah*, and it encompasses a range of meanings including breath, wind and spirit. With the definite article before *ruah*, we the readers are to understand that it is the Spirit of God that enters into those reconstituted bodies to give them life.

The irony of God commanding the prophet to prophesy to the Spirit of God should be set in context of an earlier command when God urges the Israelites to get themselves a new heart and a new spirit (Ezk 18:31). The problem facing the House of Israel in those dying days was not the Babylonian threat, rather it was the matter of the heart. Their hearts had calcified, had turned to stone; they had forgotten how to love, whom to love, that is “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might, as commanded by Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5. As much as this may sound corny and all: love is still the answer, even in the midst of a valley of dry bones. Even when our hearts have already turned to stone, God does not give up.

The passage of Ezekiel 37 largely rests on the interaction between God and a mortal, or literally a ‘son of God’ in the original Hebrew text. The radical and absolute obedience of this son of God, to prophesy to the bones and the breath, is what ultimately made life possible.

There is another ‘Son of God’, who came later after Ezekiel the prophet. This Son of God comes to give us a new heart and new spirit, he comes to write a new law and new covenant in our hearts. He comes as the embodiment of God’s love for humanity, for all of God’s creation.

By embracing the path of the cross, the path of death, he lays down the sacrifice needed so that we may live, may breath, and may not despair. By his resurrection, we have hope, knowing that even death, the last enemy, is finally defeated. “*I am the resurrection and the life*”, says Jesus in John 11, 25-26, “*Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*”

Can these bones live? Yes, Lord God, but only through Christ Jesus, the first and the last, the author and finisher of our faith, our hope and our love.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**