

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
March 31, 2013 EASTER
©2013

Bones and Stones

Ezekiel 37:1-6 NRSV 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. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. 5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 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."

Matthew 28:1-8 NRSV After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples."

Do you remember in Greek mythology the character of Sisyphus? He was the one who was forever doomed to roll a huge boulder up a steep hill. And just before he reached the top of the hill, the boulder would always roll backwards, no matter how hard Sisyphus tried to stop it. Forever straining and pushing his stone uphill and forever having it roll back down again just as he reached the top. That was Sisyphus' fate for all eternity, according to the Greek myths. An eternity without hope.¹

¹The concept for this sermon is based in part on Jamie R. Gustafson, "Dry Bones and Rolled Stones," in Spinning a Sacred Yarn (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), pp. 93-97. I am grateful to adapt part of that sermon

Have you ever felt that sense of endless effort? That sense of grinding and pushing your way up a hill that seems to have no end? Does any of your life seem to be forever pushing a stone which never gets anywhere? An effort that you would give almost anything to be able to stop, but you just don't know how to stop pushing for fear that your stone will crush you? Those stones go by many different names, don't they? Maybe your stone is named "addiction." Maybe your stone is named "family troubles." Maybe your stone goes by the name of "marriage problems," or "trapped in my job," or "relationship troubles" or "despair at always being the 'peacemaker' in my family" or "regret" or "what if" or "I wish hadn't" – and so many other names. We all have such stones, whether they are huge boulders that we strain against and don't know to stop or pushing, or whether they are small pebbles that we kept stepping on and which cause us to limp when we want to run. But what all of them have in common is the fact that we'd like to stop, but we just don't know how. And all of them often have in common a sense of hopelessness, a sense of despair, a feeling of frustration and even futility.

The prophet Ezekiel also knew what looked like a hopeless, despairing, futile situation. He was called to be a prophet to the people of Israel during their exile in Babylon, far away from all that they had known and loved, forced to abandon all that they had known, cut off from their homes, despairing of ever returning. What does one possibly say to such a people in such a situation that would not be platitudinous pablum? For this is not a time when cliches will do. But Ezekiel finds words to say to

here.

these exiles and to us; he finds his words from God while gazing over that desolated valley that must have been an old battlefield, where he saw that that valley was full of bones, dry bones. Do you know that feeling? Something in your past that is desiccated and wrung out but which still haunts you, shards of what might-have-been that keep you awake at night? Dry bones indeed. Now, to make an obvious point, bones are dead, and **dry** bones are, so to speak, very dead! These bones that were there in Ezekiel's vision were really a picture of the exiles themselves, hopeless, "clean cut off," as the scripture tells it. And, again, you and I too have stood overlooking our own valleys of dried bones; and those bones have many names, don't they? - the death of a loved one, or a move that seemed to be an exile, or an illness that saps our strength, or a relationship with friends or children or parents or family that has become dry and brittle, or a job that no longer gives us joy. What name is on those dry bones in your life?

For you see, indeed, all of us do have our stones that we push and all of us do have those dry bones in our lives. But the good news this Easter morning, the very good news is this: You no longer have to mourn in that valley of dry bones; you no longer have to roll your stone endlessly uphill as ones without hope. For the news this morning is that God has conquered sin and death and perhaps most powerfully of all the aloneness that so is so isolating and so despairing and so hopeless.

What do I mean? Well, look at that first light of the new day where Mary finds that the stone of the tomb has been rolled away, in the scripture which opened our service this morning. For remember: she had come to that tomb to pay homage to

death, to pay her respects to the dead Jesus, but discovered instead new life and new hope. Someone once said that the very earliest believers were just not very interested in “explaining” the resurrection. No, instead it was *the resurrection that explained them!* Do you hear the difference? Now we could try this morning, as so many have done throughout history, to understand the “mechanics” of the resurrection, to try to give it a medical or physiological or biological explanation that would somehow fit with our understanding of how life works. But all such attempts finally miss the point. Because the point, indeed, is that the resurrection explains us. **The resurrection explains us.** If that were not true, how else do you account for those moments in your life when everything would seem to indicate that you were indeed simply stuck – in a bad decision, in a bad relationship, in a bad place – and yet, miraculously, there appeared a way forward that you could not have imagined or predicted or expected? If the resurrection did not explain us, how else could we account for those times when hate is transcended, or beauty breaks out of ugliness, or barriers between people – barriers of class or race or gender or language or sexuality – come down? How else do you explain those moments in your life when you were able to move from cowardice to courage, from apathy to action, from cynicism and self-pity to self-transcendent love?

The resurrection explains us. And what that means is that God is constantly with us, constantly and always seeking to bring good out of even evil and tragedy, to offer hope in every moment, to promise new life even in the midst of death. What that means is that we can trust that news, for that rolled-away stone at the tomb means that

not even death – not even death in all the forms that it takes in our lives – can defeat the power, the promise, and the purposes of God.

And so, my friends, if you have seen your life more as Sisyphus lately, if you have been rolling too many stones up too many hills, then I invite you to recall this day that it is not Sisyphus that explains your life, but the resurrection. If your life has seen too many dried bones lately then I invite you to recall this day that even now God is working to re-knit and re-connect those bones into new life and new hope. The forms that that new life, that new hope, may take will often surprise you. But in them you will indeed see the God who rolled that first stone away, the God who knit up the dry bones in that valley, the God who through Jesus Christ has shown us and promised us that even life's worst will not conquer God's love, and that, as Paul says in those words that are at the center of the gospel, *"there is nothing, nothing in all creation that will separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus"* (cf. Romans 8:38).

And for that gospel, for that resurrection that explains us, animates us, and can transform us, thanks be to God! Amen.