

## A Saving Hope

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Lent 5A 2008 | Ezekiel 37; John 11

In Tom Clancy's spy novel *The Hunt for Red October*, Marco Remius is a Soviet submarine captain who is determined to defect to the West because of his disillusionment with communism. The novel charts the history of his discontent, taking special note of his emotions after his wife, Natalja, had died because of the bungling of the Soviet medical system.

Clancy describes his thoughts in this way: "He watched the coffin of his wife roll into the cremation chamber to the solemn strain of a classical requiem, wishing that he could pray for Natalja's soul, hoping that Grandmother Hilda, who had had him secretly baptized as an infant, had been right. That there was something beyond the steel door and the mass of flame. Only then did the full weight of the events strike him. The state had robbed him of more than his wife - it had robbed him of a means to assuage his grief with prayer. It had robbed him of hope."

You and I desperately need hope. Ezekiel's vision of a Valley of Dry Bones puts it so starkly: "Our bones are dried up," Israel cries, "and our hope is lost!" And we shudder. To think of hope being lost! It is a sickening thought. A pastor friend of mine is a fan of the HBO series "The Wire," which takes a brutally honest look at life in inner city Baltimore. It depicts the despair that comes upon people who have no hope of anything better, anything different - and shows how that despair leads to drug addiction, crime, and unspeakable bitterness. That is truly like finding oneself in a Valley of Dry Bones.

But we need not take such extreme cases. Consider the man or woman in the midst of divorce. Life seems out of control. The emotional pain seems almost unbearable. One almost comes to dread the morning because it means another day of trying to pretend things are OK, when they aren't. A valley of dry bones!

Is there anyone of us who has not visited that valley? William Willimon tells about the time when he was a college student, and the respected Christian leader Carlyle Marney came to speak at his campus. After the speech, a student asked, "Dr. Marney, would you say a word or two about the resurrection of the dead?" Marney said, "Sorry, I don't discuss such matters with anyone under thirty." "Why not?" they insisted. "Look at you," he replied. "Prime of life, potent, never have you known honest to God failure, heartburn, impotency, solid defeat, brick walls, mortality. So what in God's name can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ is raised?" Hard words for a 19-year-old, but most of us who are over thirty understand what he means. Given a few years of adulthood, of life in the real world, most of us pass a time or two through the Valley of Dry Bones. Indeed, some of spend most of a lifetime there.

What we need is hope. St. Paul talks about the Christian trio of faith, hope, and love - but faith and love, as difficult as they are, at least can be understood. We have more trouble with hope. Perhaps that is because hope is so easily counterfeited. Sometimes we try to pass wishful thinking off as hope. "Oh, I hope it doesn't rain on our parade next week." Or, "I hope Amy goes to sleep easily tonight." We call that hope, but it isn't, really. It is just a way of trying not to consider the possibility of something unpleasant. But in the Valley of Dry Bones, there is no wishful thinking; it is too late for that.

Sometimes we confuse hope with naive optimism. We say such great things about "the power of positive thinking," and there is certainly some good that comes from positive

thinking. It can keep us from dwelling on the negative, and keep our spirits up. But optimism, too, has its limits. There are times when optimism just doesn't square with reality. In the Valley of Dry Bones, the possibilities of positive thinking are slim to none. Leander Keck puts it this way: "If it won't play in a cancer ward or a shoddy nursing home for the elderly, then, whatever it is, it is not the gospel."

So what, then, is hope? If we take Ezekiel seriously, we must admit that hope is beyond us. It is not something that we can muster up, all by ourselves. When we are in the Valley of Dry Bones, you see, we say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost!" That doesn't leave much room for a last-minute change of weather!

*But* "Thus says the Lord God: *I* am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people!" That is the word of hope and the subject is God. *God* will do this. *God* will breathe life into these dry bones. *God* will rescue us. And that is what hope is about. It isn't about wishful thinking, or optimism, but it is about God God opening the grave, breathing life into the dry bones.

Why is this so hard for us? Well, it is because we don't like not being in control. We want to revive ourselves, renew ourselves, give life to ourselves. We think we can do it ourselves, pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and make everything OK. But it doesn't work that way. We cannot do it. We need help, God's help.

But do we want it? I'm always struck, in this passage, by the phrase, "I will open your graves." How invasive! For most of us, the concept of "grave" means finality. When it's all over, I'll be in my grave and I'll thank you to leave me in peace. Don't come knocking, trying to open things up again. And isn't that the way we often face the difficult things in our lives? We want them settled. Let me just die! Let's just end this relationship and get on with our lives! The job is too tough, I'm ready to quit! The pain that friendship causes me isn't worth it! I'm a failure, I might as well give up! Oh, isn't that like us? And so to hear God saying, "I will open their graves" well, is that what we really want? Don't we often react more like Martha at the grave of Lazarus "Lord, don't open his grave, it will stink!"

But the word of hope listens not to our hesitations and fears. "Lazarus, come forth!" Jesus declares. "I will bring you back!" God tells the dry bones. We hear the words, and we tremble. We cannot do it for ourselves, and we're not sure we would want to - but there is this promise! Harold Ivan Smith put it this way, in a poem entitled "Invitation":

*Jesus invites me  
to abandon the security of my tomb  
its darkness  
its stale pool of tears  
its crampedness  
for life in him,  
a kingdom of the now.  
For some reason  
Jesus asks not how I became  
a citizen of the tomb,  
but would I follow him?*

Yes, that's what he asks of us in this Valley of Dry Bones, in this tomb at Bethany, in the hopeless and deathly places where we are. He's not interested in how we got there, but in whether we'd like to follow him to new life, to resurrection.

Does it begin to seem like hope is more difficult than we thought? Not some spiritual and emotional narcotic, but a challenge? A challenge to leave the tomb behind and live? If that is what it seems, then we are starting to understand. Resurrection is not always easy, and not what we expect, and not even always what we want but when we follow Christ, it is where the road leads. The grave would be easier, perhaps. But it is not the end, not for Israel, not for Lazarus, not for Jesus, not for you and me.

Amen