

**5 Lent – Year A – April 13, 2011 - Homily**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

Here's a clue as to what we're going to talk about tonight. "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones. Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones. Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones. Now hear the word of the Lord." That's the chorus to a well-known African-American spiritual song written by James Weldon Johnson. The song is based on the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones.

In its own historical context, Ezekiel's vision is incredibly dramatic, and symbolic of the terrible hopelessness of the Israelites, force-marched out of their homeland into exile in Babylon. Land is one of God's covenantal promises to the Israelites and has always been important throughout Jewish history. The bones are the whole house of Israel. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God is offering the hope of restoration to new life and a return to the Promised Land. There is also the hint of future hope in God's resurrection on the last day. In Jewish thought of the day, resurrection is understood as God's vindication of the righteous, especially righteous martyrs.

In Christian theology, which is grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures as much as the New Testament, the history of salvation is a story of God's people wandering far from home in many ways. It's a story of physical displacement, and spiritual separation, but always accompanied by a longing to return to God. From the Garden of Eden, to exile in Egypt, to wilderness wanderings, and the Promised Land, to Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we've all experienced both physical and spiritual exile. For example, very few of us are still living in the place where we were born or grew up. Most of us have been forced to move for jobs, for family, for financial, or for health reasons. Sometimes the moves have been happy, and sometimes they've involved painful separations from family and friends. Spiritually, we've all been through periods so dry and devoid of Living water that we have felt completely alone, adrift from any sense of God's presence with us, and as fragile and vulnerable as the parched bones in the valley of Ezekiel's vision. Perhaps unknowingly, quite a few of us have also exiled ourselves from God in Christ Jesus through our willfulness, pride, or our desire to be in control.

Ezekiel's story of the valley of dry bones reminds us of places like Death Valley in California, where temperatures as high as 134 degrees Fahrenheit have been recorded. Yet, despite its name, when the conditions are right and the rains comes, even Death Valley blooms into amazing life full of grass and wildflowers. Our God is the God of abundant life, and its life we want to focus on tonight. According to the reading, life itself is not enough for God. Ezekiel speaks God's words, "And you shall **know** that I am the Lord, when I... bring you up from your graves, O my people." There's being alive, which everyone is familiar with. And then there's really living, which fewer people truly learn about even as they are alive. According to this prophesy, God means for us to really live, and real life is intimately connected with knowledge of God. We have a glimpse here of the real power and source of all life, in and through God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. Our task is to examine our own dry bones, and seek an answer to the question, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

In forensic science, as anyone who watches the TV series *Bones* can attest, our bones are the equivalent of tree rings and can reveal a great deal about us and how we live. Anthropologists, archeologists and forensic pathologists can determine the gender, age, height and general health of

skeletal remains, the cause of death, and can even provide information on diet and diseases. You really are what you eat – and it goes bone deep. Beyond knowledge of our basic identity, we can seek God’s wisdom about what our spiritual bones tell us at a more profound spiritual level. Our spiritual bones bear the evidence of our relationships with God in Christ Jesus, and with others. If our bare, bleached and dusty bones could testify what would they say about us? Are we going through a period of drought in our prayer lives, or in our relationships? Do we feel exiled from God and others, or starved of God’s grace?

Around the world today, the people of Japan are facing a nuclear crisis and looking death in the eye. The people of Libya are struggling under constant threat from Colonel Gadhafi’s military forces. There’s continuing violence on the Ivory Coast in Africa. Closer to home, the remains of nine murder victims have been found on Long Island, stirring feelings of deep fear. Gas prices are edging ever closer to \$4 a gallon, stretching our budgets to the limit. Our elected government officials are still arguing about spending cuts to reduce the country’s overwhelming debt and deficit. Even closer to home, I get calls for help paying rent and utility bills and so on pretty much every day. All humanity is called to walk difficult and painful paths at some time in our lives. The world is full of despair and hopelessness. Our Lord Jesus has commissioned us to share His Living water with the driest of bones. God in Christ Jesus doesn’t just put meat on our bones, renewing our life, He draws us closer to Himself, and reveals His presence, His love, His goodness to us in as many and multiple ways as we can imagine, and even beyond our limited vision.

The way in which we handle the often-harsh realities of life mark us, and are in themselves a mark of our own identity as either walking skin and bones, or vibrant living bodies alive in Christ. As Christians, when we are desperately thirsty, where do we turn to assuage our thirst? Do we turn to God, the fountain and source of Living water, or do we turn to the glittering cups of the world, or other distractions like drugs or alcohol? When we’ve been battered and swept into a dry and dusty state by the windy storms of the world, how do we open our hearts once again, to the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit? As we approach Palm Sunday and Holy Week in these last days of Lent, we might be feeling like Jesus after forty days in the wilderness, hungry for soul food, thirsty for knowledge of God’s steadfast love and providence. Whatever situations we are facing in life at this time – and its different for each us – our Lord Jesus has been there before us, and is with us even now. There is a cycle to life, which includes death. Sometimes we have to let some parts of our life die, in order to make room for new life and new growth. With our trust and hope firmly rooted in Christ Jesus, we know that for believers death presages new life in Him. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are blessed with resurrection life now and in the age to come. “Mortal! Can these bones live?” By God’s grace, the answer is yes, they can! With God all things are possible.

Amen.