

"Alas, Poor Yorick!"

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¹The 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. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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." ⁷So 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. ⁸I 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.

⁹Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, 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." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD."
(Ezekiel 37:1-14)

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We recite this ancient mantra from Genesis every Ash Wednesday as a cross is marked with ashes on our foreheads. As much as we may try to forget it, ignore it or even deny it, death is a part of every life. It is the great equalizer, something met and experienced by kings and peasants on equal footing. Someday, our bodies will fail and our lives will end. As I have heard Doug Kelling say before, "Life is a terminal illness."

As we try to imagine what the prophet Ezekiel saw when the hand of the Lord took hold of him and set him down in this valley of dry bones, we as Americans might picture a Civil War battlefield littered with the bodies of dead soldiers. This may well have been an image known previously to Ezekiel, who many believe was in the first wave of deportees taken to Babylon after the first conquest of Jerusalem in 597 BCE. Israel's soldiers had tried to defend their capital, but they had been outnumbered and roundly defeated by the larger invading force. Losses on the battlefield were heavy.¹ Could Ezekiel and the other exiles have been forced to march through a similar valley, littered with human remains, on their sad journey east?

Whether this vision touches on a personal experience for Ezekiel or is completely new to him, the prophet understands that these bones are not merely dead. They are "really quite sincerely dead." The flesh is completely gone, baked away by a burning sun. Even the tendons and ligaments that once held the bones together are gone. The skeletons lie as they fell, but they

¹ John C. Holbert, "What About Dem Dry Bones? Reflections on Ezekiel 37:1-14," <http://www.patheos.com>, April 3, 2011.

are completely disassembled. At this point, the only thing left is for the bones to return, literally, to dust.

It brings to mind another scene, in another graveyard, in another time and another place. That other scene is a literary fiction, but it still speaks a truth that, like Ezekiel's vision, has survived the centuries and continues to capture our imaginations. In Act V of Shakespeare's Hamlet, the prince and his friend Horatio happen upon a cemetery and find a gravedigger busy excavating a grave. As the two young men watch this strange hermit at work, they are shocked by his casual attitude. They think it strange that the man sings a light song as he digs, but stranger still when he begins to toss old skulls up out of the partially dug grave. It strikes Hamlet as horribly irreverent and disrespectful.

"That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once," Hamlet says to his friend as they watch the spectacle. "It might be the [skull] of a politician... or of a courtier. Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer?"²

But Hamlet's attention is not fully engaged until he begins to speak to the strange gravedigger. The man pulls another skull from the fresh grave he is digging. "Here's a skull now," he says. "This skull has lain in the earth three-and-twenty years... This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester."

Prince Hamlet's childhood memories come flying back.

"Let me see," he says, taking the skull into his hands. He gazes into its empty eyes. "Alas, poor Yorick!" Hamlet says. "I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is!" Hamlet is moved by how such a lively, humorous life could be reduced to this jawless remnant. He turns to Horatio.

"Do you think Alexander [the Great] looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?" he asks.

Of course, Horatio replies that Alexander must have looked just as bad.

"To what base uses we may return," Hamlet replies. No matter what our role in life, Hamlet recognizes our bodies all end up the same – degenerating from dust into dirt, from dirt into clay, which someone might later use to plug the hole in the bottom of a barrel.

Some have said that, as a play, Hamlet is essentially "a prolonged meditation on death."³ The entire plot is framed by death, from the ghost of Hamlet's murdered father at the beginning to the throne room full of royal bodies at the end. Even as he says "Alas, poor Yorick," he is also saying "Alas, poor Hamlet." As these skulls are tossed around the graveyard without a second thought, he sees his own mortality being tossed around in the dust of the earth. Gazing upon the bones, the message is the same as the old tombstone engraving: "As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so shall you be."⁴

Ezekiel must have felt the same sting of realization in the valley, as the Lord bid him to speak to those bones. These dry remains, he is told, represent the entire nation of Israel. They symbolize a community that has encountered its own kind of death. Even though many still live, they are wandering around as if they are already dead. They feel as if they have been torn apart, that all of the things that fed them and gave them life – temple, home, family, work – have all been ripped away from them. The people of Israel in exile were the walking dead, wondering if their community would ever really live again.

² All quotes from "Hamlet" taken from *No Fear Shakespeare: Hamlet*, New York: Spark Publishing (2003), pp. 274-91.

³ *Readings on Hamlet*, Don Nardo, ed. San Diego: Greenhaven Press (1999), p. 112.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 114.

At the same time, Ezekiel must have also seen his own future lying in that valley, his own bones. Like Ebenezer Scrooge being taken to his own grave by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Ezekiel must have recognized his own fate. "Alas, poor Ezekiel," he must have thought. "I knew him, because he was I, and I was he..."

On this Lenten Sunday, we are invited to look with honesty upon the skeletons in our own lives -- the dead or dying places, the kind of gruesome places of regret or fear or dread, the places where we really confront our own mortality. These places are simultaneously communal and personal. Some of these dry places are seen in our world, our nation, our community. Some of the dead places live inside of us, and only us. Still, as we gaze upon all of these places, the question is the same: "*Mortal, can these bones live?*" Do we really believe that these broken places, where the fibers, ligaments and tendons of life have dried up and fallen away, can be reassembled and reinvigorated? Do we really believe that what Paul says is true – that, at the end of the day, the creation "will be set free from its bondage to decay," that the groaning we feel in our own bodies as we wait for the Spirit to redeem us will indeed be restored to health and vitality by the healing hand of God?⁵

Ezekiel, like Hamlet, speaks to the bones. The Lord tells him to confront the bones with the living Word of God. He does as he is told, and he begins to hear something. It is the rattling of bone against bone, the clicking of dry calcium coming together. As he looks upon the valley, he watches as muscle builds again, and skin covers what had been dead. It is miraculous, but it is not finished.

It is only when Ezekiel invokes the Spirit that life fully returns. The word "bone" appears ten times in this text. But the word *ruach* appears no less than fourteen times. It is greater, higher, and more important than anything that happens to the bones. The word can mean a variety of things. It is sometimes translated as breath, as in the breath that you and I have in our lungs. It is sometimes translated as Spirit, as in the Holy Spirit that hovers over the waters in Genesis 1. It is sometimes translated as wind, as in the winds that blow across the earth, rustling trees, spreading seeds, moving clouds and bringing rain. All of these meanings are at play in this amazing vision – a dream that is simultaneously personal and communal, intimate and cosmic. It is only God's *ruach* that can breathe life back to these dry bones, that can bring life back to the world from the four corners of the earth, that can fill your lungs and mine with life that will never end.

But it would be a mistake on this Lenten Sunday to move too fast to that happy ending, lest we miss the full power of what God's Spirit, God's wind and God's breath does for us. Better that we linger a while with a prophet in the valley, and a prince in the graveyard, to gaze upon the decaying skulls of our own mortality, and acknowledge the drying skeletons in our own closets.

Better we linger over the question of the hour, and of eternity: "*Mortal, can these bones live?*" Amen.

⁵ Romans 8:21-25