

Dear one in the faith,

My morning steps place me on a bench in a cemetery near my home. Not long ago, it was a quiet place on a hill a couple of miles from town, but the city now surrounds it. From where I sit, you can hear the construction trucks, football practice whistles, and the road-packed rush.

The stones that surround me have names: Williams, Chandler, Vanderhill, and Jones. I have yet to see a fresh flower placed in memory, but city employees come each week to cut the grass, trim around the headstones, and wonder about their lives. Cemeteries do such things to people.

My friend in Christ, I think about my life here, and I think of you. Your ministry is so full of grieving families. You place the pall, light the candle, and with a lump in your throat, you form the words that celebrate the life of a saint who shared your life. You never thought to put a price tag on a saint, but the church budget knows the loss. You patched the leaky roof, but the rotten window in the fellowship hall will have to wait. The insurance has gone up, and the promised assistant in this year's budget is out.

The Church of God down the road from you has been converted into a restaurant. The evening specials are on the board that once proclaimed "Last Sunday's Attendance" and "Today's Hymn Numbers." You say you are "seven funerals away from such a fate."

But as I think of you in the liminal space between the graveyard and the highway, between the sermon and the seafood selection, I hear a living Word. My dear one, I am reminded of dry bones. I am reminded of a God who led a long-ago prophet to the dark valley of death. The prophet was not called there to count his losses. God sent the preacher there to answer a holy question. "Mortal, "can these bones live?"

The prophet once responded, "O, Lord God, You know!" Is that an exhausted response? I have blown my life on resuscitating Sunday mornings. I have sacrificed my nervous system, steering away from politics and keeping the congregation in the proper shade of purple. "O, Lord God,

You know, because I'm not sure I care anymore. I've done what I've done. I have nothing left in my bag of tricks."

Then, I heard God asking me again and again, "Can these bones live?" And God showed me dry bones all around, church, grave, and those stuck in traffic. All around are art, those who are politically divided, emotionally shattered, and deeply fearful of that which they do not know.

The more God questioned me, I felt a little hope blow across my face. "Mortal, can these bones live?"

I heard a call that invited me into a ministry I had not known. God brought me to the valley not to bury me in the failure of my ministry but to believe again. God brought me to the valley not to get to work in assembling knee bone to thigh bone and to knit sinew together. God brought me to the valley to know God's breath. God still breathes!

My dearest friend, God still breathes!

This fresh Spirit has convinced me that we have spent our callings making God in our image. This is nothing new. It is our original sin to listen to the hiss of the one in that long-ago garden who tempted us with good. "You shall not die, but you shall be like God." We believe we know more of God than God. Like Uzzah, we have turned callings into careers that have sought to save God from falling. Like Peter, who told Jesus, "You are the Christ!" The Christ was defined in the image of Peter, in the image of you and me. The God of our image holds on for dear life, but let us now open our ears to the one who must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elder, the chief priest, and the scribe, and be killed and, after three days, rise again!" If we are to know anything of God, let us spend time in the tomb. In the darkness and quiet, let us be faithful in the practice of nothing. "Be still and know that I am God."

In the stillness, we remember the better story of God's active power.

Remember! Abraham and Sarah needed not to ask the how, when, or why of God's covenant. They needed to rest in knowing the One whose word never returns back empty.

Remember! When David confronted the giant, he did not put his trust in the latest weaponry but in the word of God.

Remember! A last meal, a cake of flour and oil that would have to be cut and shared for the unannounced visitor. It was a last meal that became a banquet for a lifetime. Such meals feed the multitudes.

Remember! Paul's testimony soon had the emperors shaking in their boots because God's truth of love cannot be ignored. Our story is not built on the shoulders of powerful people. Our story is found in people who saw the light of God shining forth in their brokenness.

God's Spirit will breathe life into our bones. We will find resurrection to be less a theological doctrine and more of a way of life. God still breathes!

"Can these bones live?" "Oh, Lord, you know they can!" Preach! It is in preaching that the Spirit surely must intercede so that we might discover God for ourselves. When we know it in our bones, we can preach it to this valley of dry bones surrounding us. Bones who say they want nothing to do with religion or Christ, yet they cry out to be loved. They thirst for what is fair and just. They long to be called into something deeper. A thousand likes on social media is not enough; they desire to be found in the heart of the eternal one. They desperately desire the security of the soul and long to experience deep joy. We know for what they long. God still breathes!

Resurrected bones have no fear. Imagine what it would be like to preach a Word that doesn't seek to save an institution but seeks to extricate people from the things that are killing them. I know a father and daughter who do speak because of politics. I know a widow who grieves her husband's death to suicide. His failure in finance was too much of an embarrassment. I know a child who no longer smiles- bullied on social media. "Can these bones live?" You know they can!

Resurrected bones know who has the power. In light of the resurrection, the idea of the red church, blue church, and purple church is ridiculous. It is our Lord's Church. Power is knowing not to buy into the money of politics. Bury that talent, for we are not beholding to a master who "reaps where he does not sow." Let us be about giving "to God the things that are God's." Our God's love has no borders so that we will give the world God's love. God's love has no use for divisions so that we will reach out to our enemies. There is glory in the humility of the cross.

Resurrected bones are a new creation! "Behold! Everything is fresh and new!" It is Genesis again! We have a creation without history or names. Every moment becomes the moment to see this new thing in Christ. But I also know that this new creation comes with wounds. Wounds of a billion years of injustice because of the evils that have possessed us to do evil to another. The only reparation is to empty ourselves in hopes of finding our humanity and being raised up in mercy by those who bear the scars.

Resurrected bones know that God's time is all time. I know there is a great urgency among many to save this world from the destruction of ourselves. The clock is indeed ticking. However, this huge crisis requires a bigger solution. Our time is of the essence, but God's time calls us to center ourselves in the holy. Let us be content to rest in the dark valley. "Be still and know that I am God." Let us return to our spiritual practices! Repent towards rest. Let us give thanksgiving to God. Let us commune, seeing our differences and discovering our unity in body and blood. Let us sing spiritual songs. And then, in the stillness, breath.

My dear friend, the first steps of a resurrection morning are directed toward light. "Can these bones live?" "Lord, to you be all power and glory! Amen!"