



## Seeking: Can These Bones Live?

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### Gathering

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Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.  
This week, it would be appropriate to find a **purple cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in a time of preparation. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.

#### **Listen - Dem Bones**

For a bit of fun: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZo3VTMxwJA>



### Gathering

Today is the fifth week in our preparations for Easter, and again the readings offered to us this week include a long section from the gospel attributed to John alongside another longish passage from Ezekiel.

The question we are asking is: Can these bones live?

It echoes the question Ezekiel asks as God shows him the valley of dry bones.

It echoes the yearning of Mary and Martha as Jesus turns up after the death of their brother, Lazarus - "Sir, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 32).

When hope seems lost, when we simply cannot see how anything could live, Jesus comes amongst us, God breathes life in and around us.

### Light Candle

We light the candle - focussing our attention, allowing ourselves to be drawn to its flame. We look to Jesus, the light of the world, a light that shines even in the darkest of times offering hope and healing.

### Acknowledgement of Country

The Ancient of Days, breathed life into this Land and her Peoples. From time beyond our reckoning the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have blessed this place through their care and concern.

From river to ocean, from campfire to hearth

**may the First Nations who have cared for this land be blessed.**

From breath to song,

from step to dance

**may those who follow your Songlines guide us on the journey to living honourably in this place.**

From greeting to Amen,

from silence to chorus

**may our worship join with the voices of the First Nations of this Land.**

*(c) 2017, A.Koh-Butler, This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here*

## Call to Worship

Have you ever felt washed up, brittle, worn-down to the bone?  
Have you ever felt grief lay heavy on your back?  
Have you ever felt like hope was out of reach?  
Have you ever wondered, can these bones live?  
If you have, then you are in the right place, for this is God's house.  
Hope lives here.  
So, come. Rest your weary bones.  
Let us worship God together.

*Words for Worship, Seeking, Sanctified Art*

## Prayer

Gracious God, we gather in love of Jesus the Christ and open ourselves to your Spirit.  
We open ourselves to your life in the midst of death.  
We open ourselves to your hope in the midst of despair.  
In the midst of confusion and uncertainty, we open ourselves to a new way of seeing things, a new way of understanding things in your love.  
Stir us in our depths and call us out beyond every resistance. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for 26 March 2023, p.72*

## Sing - Alive to God (Tune: TIS 147)

*We sing a song that invites us to be alert to God's presence and purpose in our lives. The tune is "To God be The Glory":*

Alive to the presence and purpose of God  
in Christ's name we're gathered the people  
of God  
Alive to God's presence and open to hear  
God's word in our lives  
and God's call to come near.  
Come and sing! Praises bring!  
In Jesus we live!  
Come and praise, laugh and sing!  
New hope God will give!  
Alive to the presence and purpose of God  
God's word in our lives and God's call to  
come near.

Alive to God's purpose of justice and care  
To build a new future, defeating despair  
Alive to God's newness, new days will  
unfold  
God's Spirit gives new ways  
in place of the old.  
Come and sing! Praises bring!  
In Jesus we live!  
Come and praise, laugh and sing!  
New hope God will give!  
Alive to the presence and purpose of God  
God's Spirit gives new ways in place of the  
old.

Alive to the presence of God in the world  
who meets us in strangers, the young and  
the old  
Alive to the closeness of Jesus, set free  
to live out the good news  
through you and through me.  
Come and sing! Praises bring!  
In Jesus we live!  
Come and praise, laugh and sing!  
New hope God will give!  
Alive to the presence and purpose of God  
who lives out the good news through you  
and through me.

*David Manton*

## **Prayer**

Eternal God,  
in us and far beyond us,  
present in every atom of creation but not contained by it as we are,  
your ways are beyond us;  
try as we might, we cannot fully fathom what you are about  
and what you expect from us.  
How could it be otherwise, when we are creatures and you the creator,  
when we are mortal, and you are eternal (whatever that may mean)?

And yet, we are not wholly time- and earth-bound.  
Somewhere deep within us is a spark of the divine,  
and a deep yearning to find or to be found by you.  
We give thanks for those who have spent their lives searching for wisdom,  
and some who have achieved it.  
We are grateful for poets and artists, dancers and musicians,  
who find ways of expressing the inexpressible;  
for old souls at peace with themselves,  
for young children gasping with awe  
and jumping for joy at each new discovery.

God of freedom, we give thanks for our democracy and the privilege it is to elect our  
leaders.

We give thanks for peaceful transitions of authority.

We give thanks for the freedom and peace in which we worship this morning.

As we gather, we praise you for your presence amongst us,  
and your love and grace for all your creation. Amen.

## **Prayer of Confession - intro**

Friends, there is nothing that we have to keep hidden from God - not our anger, our grief,  
or the ways in which we have fallen short. In confession, we speak honestly and are met  
with grace. So let us not hold back. Let us bring our full selves to this prayer, knowing that  
God is already running to meet us. Let us pray:

## **Prayer**

Jesus of Nazareth,

We confess:

we forget that you know this feeling.

we forget that you, too, have wept.

we forget that you, too, have lost.

we forget that you, too, have gathered at the tomb, have grieved for a friend, have felt the  
sting of humanity.

Forgive us for all the times we place blame on you.

Forgive us for all the times we create distance, imagining that you could never feel what  
we feel.

Forgive us for allowing the valley of dry bones to be a sea of space between us.

Pour yourself into the cracks in our hearts.

Bring these bones back to life.

Bring us closer to you.

With gratitude we pray, amen.

## Words of Assurance

Friends, you could spend your whole life ignoring God, pushing God away, or trying to solve the world's problems all on your own, and God would still love you all the same. Even in our shortcomings, we are God's beloved.

So hear and believe this good news:

***We are saved by grace through faith. We belong to God. We are not alone. Amen.***

*Sanctified Art, Words for Worship*

**Listen** - Land of The Seeking (Sanctified Art)

*This song accompanies us as we look towards the cross - it invites us to inhabit the Land of the Seeking... <https://vimeo.com/800216630>*

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## Listening for God's Voice

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**Reading:** Ezekiel 37:1-14

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. <sup>2</sup>He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' <sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>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.'

<sup>7</sup> So 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. <sup>8</sup>I 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. <sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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.' <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

<sup>11</sup> Then 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." <sup>12</sup>Therefore prophecy, 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. <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup>I 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.'

**Reading:** John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' <sup>4</sup>But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

<sup>7</sup> Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' <sup>8</sup>The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?'

<sup>9</sup>Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. <sup>10</sup>But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' <sup>11</sup>After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' <sup>12</sup>The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' <sup>13</sup>Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup>For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' <sup>16</sup>Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

<sup>17</sup> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' <sup>27</sup>She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

<sup>28</sup> When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' <sup>29</sup>And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup>When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' <sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
***Thanks be to God!***

## Reflection

Creator God,  
Why is bad news so loud?  
In the midst of gun violence,  
hunger,  
melting ice caps,  
and anxiety,  
in the midst of the slogans and shouting of politics  
it often feels like suffering has a microphone.  
How do we hear you?  
How do we find you?  
How do we know that these bones can live?  
Today we bring our raw selves into this space asking that once more you would  
rush through this room like a mighty wind. Remind us that these bones can live.  
Speak to us in your still, small voice and let it be loud enough to speak to the sorrow of the  
day.  
We know that good news rests in you,  
and we know that you are here.  
So help us listen, not to the bad news of the day alone, but to the hope that you breathe  
into every word.  
With open hearts we pray, amen.

*Sanctified Art*

Jesus said:

'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will  
live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. (John 11:25-26)

These words of Jesus feature in most Christian funerals.

But how often do we hear what comes next? Jesus asks: 'Do you believe this?'

To which Martha replies,

'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the  
world. (John 11:26-27)

So I just want to offer a couple of things this morning to reflect on together.

Ezekiel's vision of dry bones coming to life, and the story of Lazarus, are both stories that  
invite us to lift our eyes and hearts to hope and to look for life beyond all that seems lost;  
and, at the same time, these stories deeply confront our reality.

It is hard for people who know the reality of death caused by drought and famine - I don't  
know if you saw Foreign Correspondent this week reminding us of the tragedy unfolding in  
Somalia - a tragedy born of the dryness of the earth and the violence of humanity towards  
one another. How do people who stare into the death of their animals and loved ones due  
to starvation - how do they hear the words of Ezekiel, of God promising to bring life to  
these dry bones?

And it is hard for anyone who knows the grief of human death to engage with Jesus'  
raising of Lazarus. Most of us know what it feels like to entrust someone we love to the  
arms of God, to lay their body in the earth or in the furnace, their ashes returned to us in a  
small box. Our reality is that death in those terms is final.

There is no doubt that the writer of John's gospel wants us to understand that Lazarus was dead - one of my favourite verses in the bible, in the old King James Version, "by this time he stinketh" (11:39).

The bones that Ezekiel sees are dried up and brittle - long dead and left to dry out in the sun (37:2).

And while it is absolutely possible to believe in the possibility of God bringing life as we know it from these places, I also think there is something much more pragmatic but equally miraculous going on here.

Over the last few weeks we have seen Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus as he wrestled with the idea of being "born from above", a renewed life born from an encounter with the Spirit of God; we have heard a conversation between Jesus and a woman from Samaria about life-giving water flowing through Jesus; and we have heard of a man whose life is renewed in the restoration of sight. Here again, life is renewed, reawakened in the encounter with Jesus. And alongside Lazarus' reawakening is a vision of God's breath reawakening dry and brittle bones, and recreating them with all they need to live again.

Many of us, from time to time, experience dryness of soul or spirit; tiredness of body, mind and soul; sometimes even a depth of defeat or failure that feels like we simply have nothing more to give or that as we look into our future, we can see nothing, a bleak, black nothingness. John of the Cross calls it the "dark night of the soul", perhaps for some it looks like a depressive illness - maybe even it describes the depths of despair we feel when we look around the world and see violence, sabre rattling, extreme poverty, people affected by earthquake, flood, fire, famine; or when we see a person we love gripped by an addiction or struggling with illness, and we feel helpless.

Jesus, if only you had been here, things would be different.

'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

What does it mean to "believe"?

Some of you will have heard me say before that belief is not a head thing.

It is not about simply agreeing with a set of propositions or doctrines.

And it is certainly not about blindly following whatever comes our way.

The root of the English word 'believe' in Latin is "credo" and it is related to the root of the word "Coeur doux" which means 'heart' - which is also related to *cardia*, as in cardiology. So belief is not about having to convince our heads that a set of statements is true, but to believe is *coeur doux*, committing or giving our hearts to the truth of it.<sup>1</sup>

Believing, then, becomes a commitment of our hearts to the love of God, to the stories of Jesus and who he says he is - and allowing that heart commitment to shape our living. Our head rightfully wrestles with and figures out meaning, but our hearts give shape to that meaning, and our hands and feet put it into action.

So when Jesus ask, do you believe this?

He is not asking for us to nod our heads in agreement, he is asking us to commit our hearts to who he is - life in all its fullness, light in the darkness, life beyond the pain and despair of even death.

Martha's response is all of this:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-bishop-michael-curry-on-love-hope-in-troubling-times/>

<sup>27</sup>She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

As we move closer to our remembering during Holy Week and our celebration of Easter, what does it mean for you to believe in the one who is the "resurrection and the life"? How does your belief shape your living?

May God's breath touch your tired and aching soul and renew your strength.  
May Jesus call you out of the tomb you find yourself in.  
May the Spirit of God lead you to act with hope and renewed life in the world you encounter.

Let us pray...

When we are overwhelmed or in despair, we turn again to you, O God, for you feel our anguish and you will lift us up, reawakening life in us once more. Breathe your spirit into us and give us new life so that we may walk always in hope. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for 26 March 2023, p.70*

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## Responding

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**Sing** - Can These Bones Live (Tune: TIS 134)

*This song was written for today's readings, speaking of hope that reaches beyond the dryness and darkness.... The tune is "Praise My Soul The King of Heaven"*

When the past is dead and buried,  
lifeless in the barren ground,  
what good can emerge from ashes?  
Where can any life be found?  
Breathe in deep the rushing Spirit  
Life is growing all around.

When our spirits feel so broken,  
wrapped in linens and entombed,  
without hope and without feeling  
as the storm clouds 'round us loom,  
hear the words of life from Jesus,  
"Come out, be unbound," and bloom.

When our hearts are bowed in sorrow  
and the grief is newly wrought,  
crying, "If you'd only been here,"  
weeping for what we have lost,  
resurrect our hearts and spirits,  
Living God, whom we exalt.

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**Prayer for Others** (Kay Cope)

Creator God,  
we give thanks for the amazing blue planet that is our home:  
a tiny speck in a vast universe that may itself only be one of many.  
The more we learn,  
the more we realise how little we know;  
the more we achieve,  
the more we are in danger of destroying the very things that make life possible.  
And so, we pray today for Mother Earth and all her children -  
not just the human ones,  
but especially them,  
because we are the ones whose choices now can change the future for good or for ill.



We pray for wisdom on the part of world leaders  
and our newly elected State government,  
as well as our local leaders,  
and courage to follow through on the promises that are more easily made than kept.  
We give thanks for the privilege it is to participate in the election of our leaders and pray  
that we will continue to nurture and protect our democracy.

We pray for people we know who are unwell, people who are grieving the loss of loved  
ones, people who are struggling with the burdens of living.  
Keep us alert to the needs of people around us and give us all that we need to respond in  
your love and grace.

Gracious God,  
you knew what you were doing when you asked us to care for creation in your name.  
You knew the risk you were taking and thought it worthwhile.  
May we show ourselves even yet to be worthy of your trust.  
Grant us compassion and humility,  
generosity of spirit and a radical shift in our sense of what really matters and what really  
does not.  
Hold on to us and keep us safe  
as we venture into deep dark places  
in our search for wisdom,  
which is also the search for you,  
the one is already out looking for us,  
determined to find us and bring us home. Amen.

*Adapted from Spill The Beans, Issue 46, Resources for Lent 5, 26 March 2023, p.39*

### **Offering**

*As we have received, so we consider our response...*

*We make space now to think about what we have heard and seen today and consider our  
response.*

*As we make our offering - we remember again that this is not just about money - either  
here in the plate or through a bank transfer - this is also about how we are generous with  
our time and energy and gifts; and about how we resolve to live differently because we  
have encountered the living Christ.*

*And if this is your first time with us or if you are visiting, please don't feel obliged to give.*

*You are our guests, and we want you simply to enjoy the blessings of worshipping together.*

*We are glad you are here!*

*Let us pray...*

God of life, you invite us to share life.

We offer these gifts and pray that they may bring life and hope to those who receive them.  
Amen.

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### **Sending**

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**Sing** - Where The Spirit Is, There's Freedom (TIS 421)

*Ezekiel speaks to the wind and life is awakened. As God's Spirit breathes in our lives life  
and freedom is born.*

*Where the Spirit is there's freedom.  
Where the Spirit is, there is life!*  
Not by the world can our freedom be  
nourished,  
not by our things, only by Spirit.  
Practise, my children, to live by the Spirit,  
drop all your masks, take freedom's  
clothing!

*Where the Spirit is there's freedom.  
Where the Spirit is, there is life!*  
Heaven on earth, here we live free to  
love and to share, carried by joy.  
Practise, my children, to live by the Spirit,  
daring today to taste God's future!

*Where the Spirit is there's freedom.  
Where the Spirit is, there is life!*  
Wounds will be healed, eyes will be  
opened,  
imaging God, reflecting Jesus.  
Practise, my children, to live by the Spirit,  
heaven is here, time made eternal!

*Where the Spirit is there's freedom.  
Where the Spirit is, there is life!*

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### **Sending Affirmation**

We believe that God loves us -

***God loves us so much that God weeps when we are gone.***

We believe that God does not give up on us -

***breathing new life into tired bones.***

We believe that God returns to us -

***always seeking us when we are lost.***

We believe that God holds hope for us -

***so we hold onto hope as well.***

We believe, help our unbelief.

***In Christ's name we pray, amen.***

### **Blessing**

As you leave this place,  
may God bless you with seeking.

Seek out the hungry.

Seek the weary.

Seek the good in every person you pass.

Seek out the hopeful.

Seek the faithful.

Seek God in each of us.

As you seek and as you wonder,  
may you find what you are looking for.

In the name of our loving God,  
who is always seeking us,

go now in peace. Amen.

Liturgy adapted from material from:

*Seasons of the Spirit*, Resources for Lent-Easter 2023

*Spill The Beans*, Resources for Lent-Easter 2023

*A Sanctified Art: Seeking*, [www.sanctifiedart.org](http://www.sanctifiedart.org)

Rev Kath Merrifield

26 March 2023