

March 22, Lent 5A (Ezekiel 37:1–14; John 11:1–45)

Dry bones don't resurrect themselves.

by [Erica MacCreaigh](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

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Can these bones live?

Has your life ever been so disrupted that you found yourself asking that question? All of us who have passed through—or still inhabit—the valley of the shadows of abuse, addiction, displacement, divorce, financial catastrophe, chronic illness, terminal illness, mental illness, or death know what cataclysmic disruption looks like. We spend our days in survival mode. If we can find the energy to hope, we look forward to a day when we will be through the worst of it and feel like we can stand up and breathe on our own again.

During the COVID pandemic, my marriage ended abruptly, I had to sell the dream house my spouse and I had purchased just four years earlier, my first pastorate ended badly, and I found myself in a temporary job in a town where I knew no one 800 miles from my family. I sank into a prolonged depression. I fantasized feeling reconnected with humanity and safe in my own skin. Gradually, the weight and darkness began to lift. But I was surprised, emerging from the worst of it in 2024, to find myself not elatedly liberated but utterly depleted. A pile of dry bones.

I can't say I exactly asked, "Can these bones live?" My questions were more like, What do I do now? How am I supposed to even do anything? What if I never feel like doing anything ever again? I didn't have any energy left—I'd given everything I had to simply surviving. In the months after my emergence from the valley of death, I slept a lot. I scrolled a lot. I ate a lot of Oreos. These numbing mechanisms take the edge off but can become habitual. As habits, they sucked the life out of me, leaving me even drier.

Where do I belong? Am I ever going to feel like myself again? Is it ever going to be better than this? I asked all these questions in my driest hours. In my pastoral work, I've heard more variations of "Can these bones live?": Will my family ever heal from this? I'm retired—now what? I don't remember what a good night's sleep is like. I survived deployment or divorce or downsizing or the death of a loved one, but I don't recognize my life anymore. Who am I now that the kids and grandkids have moved away?

Dry bones, lifelessness, listlessness, alienation, abandonment—these things are barely survivable. How does anyone come back to life after them? I can tell you from personal experience that self-motivated solutions don't always cut it. Dry bones don't resurrect themselves.

When the writer of Ezekiel asks, "Can these bones live?" he is asking about the fate of the Jewish people. He uses dry bones as a metaphor for the anguish of a people who have suffered the horrors of siege warfare and exile. Dry bones represent national hopes crushed, religious faith shattered, social ties severed, economy in collapse, and homes scorched and deserted.

Into this desolation, these are the first words God gives Ezekiel to speak to the bones: "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

The operative word of the Lord in this week's gospel lesson might seem to be, "Come forth!" But in my experience, any such word from God did little to penetrate my tenacious funk. What made all the difference was how God used people to keep me engaged with life—sometimes through a phone call, often an uncannily well-timed text, occasionally a visit from out of state. For me, Jesus' command to "unbind [Lazarus] and let him go" was the call answered by others who brought me back to the land of living.

Near the end of my wilderness wandering, a friend took me to lunch and listened sympathetically as I bewailed my fate for about 40 minutes. When I finished, she asked, "What makes it possible for you to keep your faith in God?"

I had to think about that. And then I replied, "Not what, who. You make it possible. People like you, people who don't give up on me. You give me hope that God still cares."

Can these bones live? Yes, by the voice and presence of the people of God bringing living water to a thirsty world. As Teresa of Ávila famously observed, Christ has no body but ours, no hands or feet on earth but ours. Through our eyes Christ looks upon the world with compassion. Upon our feet Christ walks to do good. And with our hands Christ blesses the world.

To that I'd add that through our ears Christ hears the cries of those who suffer, through our presence Christ companions the lost, and through our voices Christ speaks the truth about the stubborn resiliency of the human spirit.