

Resurrected hopes: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

When the promising young Hebrews were dragged into exile in Babylon, they were not kept in prisons or even camps. They were free to marry, build homes, plant crops and exchange goods. Some became quite wealthy. They were also free to assemble, elect leaders and worship. But the Hebrews had a hard time worshiping in exile because they never got over the destruction of their holy city and temple in Zion.

They were not where they wanted to be, or where they were supposed to be. So they lived with a sadness that ran down to their bones. And they refused to “sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.”

Often when people’s lives have been interrupted by a great tragedy, they stop coming to worship. I used to think this was because they were embarrassed by their loss of a loved one, job or health. But I’ve discovered that more often the reason people stop worshiping is that they have lost their vision of God. To stand in worship beside so many who are singing praise to the Lord just creates too much existential contradiction. It’s a tragic irony of the soul that in the times we most need to worship, we find it most difficult.

Like the exiles in Babylon, we try to numb the spiritual pain by making life more comfortable. We work hard. We collect a lot of things. We buy houses, plant our roots, live quietly and try to make Babylon as nice as we can. But however nicely we decorate it, Babylon is still not our home. And the day we deaden our longing for God is the day we spiritually die. Then the rest of us begins to slowly die, from the inside out.

Eventually things got so cozy for the Hebrew exiles that even after they were encouraged to go to Jerusalem most of them didn’t want to go back. The old dream of living in the Lord’s presence had died buried under piles and piles of coping devices.

So one day the Spirit of the Lord grabbed hold of his prophet Ezekiel, and took him to a valley filled with dry bones. The Lord asked Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones

live?" Looking around at all those skeletons, Ezekiel thought hard and said, "Ah, Lord, you know the answer to this one." Then the Lord told him to start preaching to the bones. The Lord even gave him the message: "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live . . . And you shall know that I am the Lord."

How foolish this must have looked. The Lord's prophet, standing in the middle of a pile of dead bones, is telling them not to give up hope. If I was Ezekiel, I would have gently suggested that the Lord first bring these bones back to life, and then I'll do a little preaching. "See," I'd say, "See what God can do?" But that is not the way of God, who calls us to believe without seeing. That is because the Lord's words always make room for hope. And it is the hope that brings us back to life. Hope rises up from our bones, and chooses to believe in spite of how it is.

Walter Brueggemann has written that hope proclaims that the way things appear is precarious. So we dare not absolutize the present. Don't take it too seriously. Don't bank on today because it will not last. Thus, hope is revolutionary. That is why the poor are great at hoping, and why we in the middle and upper classes who are coping well in Babylon have such a hard time with hope. We think we are doing well enough. Our only worry is that we will lose ground tomorrow. But if we turn against tomorrow, we turn our back on hope. It is then that the human spirit begins to wither away.

The apostle Paul told the believers in Rome that the one "who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom. 8:11). The church has always found its life not in what it sees today but in the Spirit of the God who raises dead hopes. The day we lose our ability to envision a better tomorrow is the day we deny that we really believe in the resurrection.

Why does the church keep pouring out its little cup of water into the West Bank, Sudan and other desperate places of the world where hope has run dry? Why do we keep visiting the shut-ins and those in hospitals when we have no miracle drug to take away their pain? Why do we commit ourselves to the political process when there is so much cynicism and a malaise of despair in politics today? Why? Because God is not done.

So we will take our stand beside Ezekiel and proclaim our hope to the dry bones. "Thus, says the Lord, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live!" *You* who

gave up hope, who gave up dreaming—who have settled for a comfortably routine life of work, bills and dirty laundry. You who think your best years are behind you. You who think the Lord God has forgotten all about your little life.

To you, we say, “Arise!” Arise from the heap of discarded dreams. Arise to discover that the Holy Spirit is breathing life back into you. Arise to live with magnificent hope! Because the world is dying for you to believe God is not done.