

## **“Impossible”**

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, March 26, 2023

Texts: Ezekiel 37: 1-14 and John 11: 1-44

Our bones are dried up,  
our hope has perished,  
our life thread has been cut.

Just another way to phrase Ezekiel 37: 11-14.

Jesus began to weep.

The Gospel of John's description of how moved Jesus was when he saw Mary and the others who wept before him over Lazarus.

It is very human to see things as dead, lost, impossible to fix, hopeless, sad, distressing, and downright depressing. In fact, depression among humans, especially our young people, continues to skyrocket resulting in a host of risky behaviors, and suicidal ideation. Depression, which can come from our genes or our environment or both is overwhelming an already stretched mental health system. And that doesn't count the people who are hurting who don't tell anyone, or ask anyone for help. Sometimes the pain is covered through addictive substances, or other harmful means. What do we do when life seems impossible, with no way forward?

Both of our stories today ask this question in different ways. In Ezekiel, the prophet is having a dream, for lack of better words, and is seeing a valley full of dry, old, dead bones. There could be no picture more stark. The “valley of the dry bones” was symbolic for the nation of Israel, defeated in war, with many carried off into exile. It seemed to many that not only had the nation died, but God right alongside with it. To say it was depressing or demoralizing would be an understatement. Can these bones live? The obvious answer is, “no”.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus has been notified that Lazarus, a long-time friend, was near death. Jesus stayed two days longer in a place he wasn’t really welcomed because he knew what other people didn’t know. Lazarus’ friends and family had watched him die. He’d been dead four days before Jesus arrived. Will Lazarus live again? The obvious answer is, “no”.

It’s easy to write these famous stories off as fantastic...unreal...even crazy. With many stories in the Bible, it’s sometimes hard to take what happened as literal fact. Sometimes we even know things didn’t occur exactly the way they are presented. Often, our literalism, or our fight against it, lead us to dismiss the real purpose behind the stories. The Bible often speaks in metaphor and is difficult to understand. This is especially true when we think we know everything. Or worse, we think we can control everything. Our depression comes from an unwillingness to see things from another perspective, to engage our core spirituality which leads to hope and to resilience.

Science agrees that spirituality can be not only preventive of depression, but a powerful tool to overcome it.

This week, I participated in reading "*The Awakened Brain*" by Dr. Lisa Miller. On Thursday, I participated in a webinar she hosted. "Weaving her deeply personal journey of awakening with groundbreaking research, Dr. Lisa Miller's book reveals that humans are universally equipped with a capacity for spirituality, and that our brains become more resilient and robust as a result." Spirituality may or may not be synonymous with religion, but a connection with our spirituality, Dr. Miller contends, can literally save lives and give us hope and resilience in a world that often gives us sadness and despair.

We so want to control everything that happens. "Jesus, if you had been here, maybe my brother wouldn't have died." God, if you showed up on my timing, my way, to do my bidding, then I wouldn't be so depressed and so sad. Meanwhile, we've been told that if we're faithful we won't suffer, despite no biblical evidence. Where do we find hope when things just aren't right, and there seems no way forward. Do we just wait for a miracle? Do we chastise ourselves for not having enough belief to coerce God to do our bidding? Do we make our sadness and depression worse by looking for how whatever is happening is our own fault? Did Ezekiel cause Israel to fall? Did Mary and Martha not care for their brother, or pray enough, to save Lazarus' life? To some of us, those seem to be unhelpful questions, to say the least, but I submit that these feelings cross our minds more than we will admit. Life circumstances, combined with

self-doubt or self-guilt, make a bad situation worse. So what do we do when life seems impossible?

Our theme for Lent this year is about having conviction in things unseen. Last week we explored how sometimes people are overlooked, or unseen, and that God has a plan for each of us and all of us, and the world is short-sighted, or even blind to that reality because we judge based on the wrong things. This week, we look at what seems impossible and see if we have any tools to help us move forward.

First is to realize that bad things happen to good people, good things happen to bad people, bad things happen to bad people, and good things happen to good people. Dr. Harold Kushner wrote a whole book on the situation. One of our problems is that we think that faith, or God action, is merit-based. There is little in the Bible to support such a claim, and yet, many of us still believe that if I'm "good enough", "smart enough", "pray enough", or am faithful enough, then no bad things will happen to me. It's quite ironic when our Bible is full of stories of bad things happening to good people. Jesus might know a thing or two about such a story.

The second thing I think gets in our way is that while we may be religious, we may not be tapping into our spirituality. Dr. Miller does extensive research on the effects of spirituality on our brains. It's really quite astounding. Her research has led her to demonstrate that engaging our spirituality may be 80% effective against suicide. It may also be 80% effective against depression. I encourage you to check out her

books to learn more, but basically, if I understand her correctly, we have a lot more resources available to us than we might imagine.

Often, I think that engaging our spirituality means taking a break from that which is concerning to us. A walk in the forest. Reading psalms. Baking, for some. Whatever it is that engages your spirit thereby freeing up your personal resources to better ascertain what might be a way forward. Further, we realize that there is more in our life that we cannot control than perhaps we will acknowledge. A higher power, however you term it, gives hope and power and possibility when everything we see before us leads to sadness, resignation, or depression.

Sometimes what looks like a bad event leads to a breakthrough in a situation that we couldn't make right. We just fail to see it. Our eyes are so focused on what we believe to be "real" that we cannot see what is actually real. A crisis may bring help and hope to a situation that we've prayed about, worked on, and tried our own way for years. In the midst of crisis, someone helps us do what we'd been trying to do all along.

Can these bones live? Our limited, human vision says no. Death is death and death is final. Maybe those specific individuals (in Ezekiel) cannot be risen the way Lazarus was, but maybe the nation they represent has a way forward that no one can see right now. Look back at your life. I know you have been in situations before that you were sure were going to destroy you, your livelihood, your family, whatever. And maybe things did fall apart, but later you realized that there was something ahead.

There is something deeper...something more. Our life journeys lead all over the place and to situations and circumstances well beyond our control. And yet, through it all, there seems to be a way where there wasn't a way. You got this far, scars and all, sometimes through people and situations that you cannot name nor understand. Sometimes a break from it all gave you sight to see a possibility you couldn't otherwise see.

This is hard to explain. Dr. Miller's research makes the science clearer than I can. And our Bible tells stories that seem so fantastical to be true. And yet, taken together, we realize that there is something more...someone who...leads us beyond the impossible to the amazing. Spirituality doesn't take away the problem, but it does give us a way forward. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things unseen. There is something bigger, something more, something inside of you that leads to places you cannot imagine. Putting together the best of science and the best of spirituality leads to a hope we all need.

It's true. It looks impossible right now, whatever it is, but it is not the final word. Engage your spirit. Engage the spirit of God. Engage in something bigger than what is right before you. Open your eyes to see new things. Open your heart to receive a love that will never let go of you.

Let us finish with a prayer I came across this morning by Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie, called *A Prayer When God Seems Absent* (from Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, Sunday, March 26, 2023):

*Oh God, comfortable would we be*

if You gave us formulas and answered prayers and realized hope.

But You call us beyond comfort.

But God, life upends us.

We face divorce or miscarriages, financial struggles or job insecurity,  
and the people we love are tossed about by disease or loneliness

or homelessness or addiction.

We are afraid.

We don't have adequate answers.

And sometimes we can't find you.

Or, we can't find the person we hoped You would be.

May we learn to trust that You aren't asleep on the job.

That You haven't forgotten us.

That You are as near to us as our very breath

Give us the courage to press on.

To suffer with hope that You have overcome the world.

May again and again we be awed by Your presence.

That even when we feel we've hit rock bottom,  
may we recognize we have fallen into Your arms  
because there is no place so deep or so dark or so scary  
that Your presence cannot reach.

In the name of the One who can still the seas with mere words,

*Amen.*