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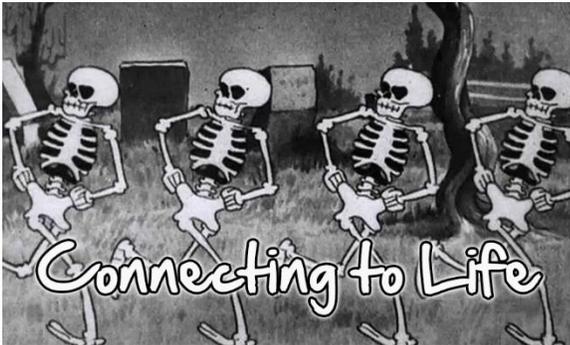
**Title:** Connecting to Life

**Preaching:** Kyle Brown, Pastor of Connections and Outreach

**Scripture:** [Psalm 22:1-10, 21-26](#)

**Text:** [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

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Hoda Kotb once said, "I love music." For me, music is a morning coffee. .It's mood medicine. It's pure magic. A good song is like a good meal –I just want to inhale it and then share a bit with someone else.

Music has the power to remind and transport us to important milestones in our life like Jason Marz's Song, *I'm Yours*

It's the song Sarah and I danced to on our wedding night. Or Green Days' *Time of Your Life* was my graduation song from High School. It's amazing how words and melody consume us causing us to experience a variety of emotions and memories that can swallow us whole. Like John Lennon's classic song *Imagine*.

*Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace  
You, you may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you will join us  
And the world will be as one.*

Or Simon & Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, Jeff Buckley's *Hallelujah*, The Righteous Brothers' *You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling*, Whitney Houston's *I Will Always Love You*, Led Zeppelin's *Stairway To Heaven*, or Chubby Checker's *The Twist*. As I name these songs, you remember a moment, an experience where you first heard it or people you were with, when it was on the radio.

Music is powerful, so when I came across the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37 I immediately thought of this 1928 classic, *Dem Bones*. You know it...

*Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,  
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,  
Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones,  
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

Then it goes into a classic head, shoulders, knees and toes verse with everything being connected.

*From the toe bone and the shin bone  
To the backbone and neck bone.*

But it's the chorus that has always stuck with me.

*Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.  
Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.  
Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.  
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

Vacation Bible School was the first place I ever heard this song. It was used as an energizer to kick off our day. Like Father Abraham, Noah, and Pharaoh, Pharaoh, the song *Dem Bones* had these wonderfully comical motions that accompanied the song. You're lucky that I am shy; otherwise, you would have witnessed my lack of coordination and inability to dance. It would have definitely been one of those, I'm laughing at you, not with you, moments. Now, VBS would not be the only time I heard this song. It would be sung at retreats, camps, and even in my anatomy class in high school. Mrs. Cox always had to point out the bones, on our skeleton Dave, as she sang Dem Bones at the top of her lungs. For years, I thought it was a playful song created by a youth minister who wanted another song with playful motions or an anatomy teacher wanting to teach her students about the bones of the body. I had no clue it was an African-American spiritual or that its inspiration came from our story today.

It's funny how childhood songs look different when we are older. The childlike wonder is lost on our aging bodies and we are left asking an all-too-personal question "Can these bones rise again?"

In our text today, the prophet Ezekiel tries to help the Israelites see that yes, in fact, they can rise again. The problem, it's been a long winter. Scripture says, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off." (Ezekiel 37:11b) For the Israelites, it probably feels that way. It's been 1400 years since Father Abraham. 800 years since Moses and the Red Sea. 400 years since King David became the great king of the Jewish nation. 400 years later they are not doing so well. They have drifted very far from the faith of their grandparents. Their kings have been lousy. Their armies have done even worse. And the faith of the people has grown thin. Now they find themselves in exile in Babylon; far from the land that was promised and blessed to them by God. They are unsure of how to worship, because the temple, the place God resides, has been torn down. These are people who are not where they want to be or who they want to be, so sadness

has run deep into their bones. And they refuse 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. It's hard to find God, in the midst of such pain, sorrow, and loss. I remember the days and weeks following the death of Chris Delaware. Del as we called him, had just been married. He was the best man at my wedding and a connector of people and had always been a positive influence in my life and those who were around him. He loved coaching basketball, Halloween was his favorite holiday, and he was always present when needed. The qualities he possessed are rare these days, and so when I got the call that he had died of a heart defect while pulling into his office parking lot, I felt a sense of disbelief. How could someone who had done so much good, be taken so quickly? How could God do this, I thought. The next few weeks in worship were painful. To stand in worship beside so many who were singing praise to the Lord, just created too much existential contradiction. So, I faked it. I tried to pray. I tried to find God in the midst of my sorrow, but the silence left me feeling empty and angry. It's a tragic irony of the soul, that in the times we most need to worship and pray, we find it most difficult.

Like the Israelites exiled 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, however comfortable we become, Babylon is still not our home. God is always calling us to return home, even in the midst of our pain and sorrow.

For the Israelites, this call to newness comes from the prophet Ezekiel. "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. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry." (Ezekiel 37:5b-6) It's hard not to envision a desert scene with bones and skulls lying in disarray as far as the eye can see. And it is here. Amidst death and desolation, pain and sorrow that 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: "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 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."

The Israelite people had a name for this breath of God. It was the Hebrew word *ruach* and it literally means a mere breath. "God. . . gives breath [*ruach*] to all living things" When God created Adam, He breathed into Adam's nostrils and "man

became a living creature." God's breath, God's creative power, God's Holy Ruach is responsible for all that is created, and it is exactly what we see take place as Ezekiel begins preaching. "I prophesied and suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and there were tendons on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them....and then the breath from the four winds filled them." (Ezekiel 37:7-10) From death and desolation, pain and sorrow - comes joy and life lived abundantly. Hopelessness has been transformed into hopefulness. Today has become tomorrow. What was once lost is now found.

The great theologian 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.

In an issue of National Geographic, an article entitled "Lost tribes of the Green Sahara" describes how archaeologists unearthed some 200 graves near vanished Lake Chad indicated the Sahara was once a fertile area. The skeletons buried there disclosed amazing information about two groups of people who lived at least 1000 years apart. The bones and teeth unearthed from the grave revealed the sex, age, general health, diet, diseases, injuries, and habit of the deceased. The size and condition of the bones gave clues to lifestyle, work, and the living conditions of the inhabitants. Based on the teeth of the Kiffian people, investigators could tell that their diet included coarse-grains; they drank from local water sources and probably did not travel far from the Gobero, where they lived. The bones of the Ternarian people disclosed that they were more lightly built and may have been herders, but they also likely depended on hunting and fishing.

Our bones tell a story! For Ezekiel, we see people hurting and grieving because they have lost their God and their way. Hope has faded, complacency has set in, and they are a people lost in the present, unable to see the future. These feelings have at some point been a part of our faith journey, and we could name that struggle with addiction, loss of family and friend, and the hopelessness found with those who struggle from mental illness. It is why this story resonates so well with us. It is our story too. We have been those dry bones. We have felt lost in our faith. We have struggled to get out of bed. We have felt isolated and alone. We have seen the depth of despair. If you live life long enough, you will experience pain, loss, and struggle....and it will leave you dry, and your bones will hurt. And when that moment hits, we cry out to God. Where are you? This calling out to

God is what we see in Psalm 22, where we see this heartfelt expression of grief and sorrow. It is also the same words spoken by Jesus as he dies upon the cross.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night but find no rest. (Psalm 22:1-2)

These words have been my truth, especially in those difficult times. But if we read on, the psalmist does not end there because he transitions from hopelessness to hope. As he ends with the comforting presence of God. He says,

“From the horns of the wild oxen, you have rescued me.  
I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:  
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.  
May your hearts live forever!” (Psalm 22:22-26)

The psalmist low point did not become their last point, for it ends in hope. God breathed new life into those dry bones. The prophetic voice of Ezekiel reminded the Israelites that their low point did not become their last point, for it ends in a new beginning. God breathed new life into those dry bones. Their God is our God and, is wanting to breathe new life into our dry bones, our life, our very being.

That breath came to me following the death of Chris, not in a valley surrounded by dry bones, but in a house, Chris called home for the first 18 years of his life. It was a year after his death where friends and family had gathered to share stories and remember a life well lived. As one person went and then the next, I begin to be filled with a deep appreciation for having a friend who meant so much, to so many. I also saw that I was not alone, that those in this room were going through the same struggles I had faced over the past year. That moment became holy, and I could feel the presence of God in that place. For me, I had many Ezekiel's, reminding me to allow God to breathe new life into my painfilled dry bones.

That is what the church does. It gives us a place to receive the breath of God. It allows us to 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, you who gave up dreaming, you who have settled for a comfortable routine 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, God says, "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! God is wanting to do new things with you and through you.