

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 105:24-34, 35b

Acts 2:1-21
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Life is full of death, despair, and darkness. How are we as Christians to understand all of this death, darkness and despair? We may ask where is God in the midst of it all? Has God abandoned us? Our readings from Ezekiel and Romans proclaims that in the midst of the darkness we still have hope in God.

A Small, Good Thing is a short story written by Raymond Carver. It is the story of Howard and Ann Weiss and their son Scotty. Everything has seemed right in their world. Everything changes in the Weiss family. On the day of his eighth birthday, Scotty is walking home from school when he is hit by a driver. When the driver saw Scotty pick himself off the street, the driver took off. Scotty walks home and tells his mother what happened. When she asks if he was feeling all right, Scotty laid down on the sofa, closed his eyes, and went limp. He is rushed to the hospital where the doctors reassure the parents. Yes, Scotty had a concussion and skull fracture, BUT Scotty was not in a coma. Rather, he was in a rather deep sleep, a way for his body to heal. The doctors keep reassuring the parents that Scotty would wake up any time. However, a few days later, Scotty dies. The parents do not understand with all of the reassurances the doctors had given them. It turns out that he had a hidden Occlusion, the doctors saying it was a one-in-a-million circumstance. The reader is taken into the pain of the Weisses' agony.

It is a fictional story, but it does mirror life. Life is filled with death. Like the Weisses we may find ourselves in despair, we hope for a good ending, especially when the experts try to reassure us, and yet death and darkness still has its victory. Death is all around us. And we are not just talking about physical, biological death. Death is

experienced in oppression, injustice, poverty, hunger, homelessness; broken relationships, sex trafficking, pornography, domestic abuse, child abuse. People who have Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia are slowly dying each day. We lose more and more of them each day. Death in the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Death in natural disasters such as the recent earthquake in Nepal. Death is all around us.

The agony of life is one that Paul knew as he wrote to the church in Rome. Here he is mindful of the "groaning" and "sighs" that belong to us in the present age—even the children of God. Perhaps that is one way to describe life in the present age; filled with groaning and sighs.

That was the situation for Israel in our reading from the prophet Ezekiel. Israel is in the midst of their death and despair, the Babylonian exile. The temple had been destroyed, their holy city plundered, their leaders maimed and put in chains, their soldiers put to the sword, their young men and women either killed or dragged into a foreign land. Their temple was the residence of God, the center of their faith, the place of their worship. Its destruction created a crisis of faith. Was their God dead? Had God abandoned Israel? Were the gods of Babylon more powerful than the God of Israel? With no Temple, how could they worship God? They were experiencing their own groaning, their own death.

God provides Ezekiel with a vision of death. Ezekiel sees an entire valley with dry bones strewn all around. These bodies had been dead and decomposing for a long time. All that was left was dry bones. Like the Coroner of Munchkin Land in the *Wizard of Oz* reported when Dorothy's house landed on the wicked witch: "As Coroner I must

aver, I thoroughly examined her. And she's not only merely dead, she's really most sincerely dead." This vision was a metaphor for Israel's hopelessness. Life in exile was death. Can one create any stronger image of death, hopeless, despair? It is the kind of image you might see in any of the zombie movies that have become quite popular, such as *Zombieworld*, which is described as "There is nowhere to hide...nowhere to run...the Zombie Apocalypse has come, and our world now belongs to the dead!"

Then God asks Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I can imagine what Ezekiel was thinking. Of course they cannot live! However, is this a trick question. So he does not commit to an answer, but simply responds, "O Lord God, you know." God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. As Ezekiel does so, the bones begin to rattle, moving and connecting; sinews begin to cover the bones, and finally flesh was upon them. But they are not yet alive. There is no breath in them. Ezekiel prophesies to the four winds, and breath enters these bodies. In the Hebrew language, the same word is used for wind, breath, and spirit. The bodies are alive. We see here a resurrection. In the creation account we read about God breathing into the nostrils of Adam, giving him life. God not only gives life, but this vision declares that God also restores life.

This vision is not about the bodily resurrection we believe as Christians. It was not a vision of dead Israelites being resurrected. Rather, it is about the people, the nation of Israel being restored to life. It is a vision for the house of Israel that they will be freed from the powers of death experienced in the exile. It was a powerful image of hope for ancient Israel, hope given in the midst of death, despair, and hopelessness.

Hope! Think about the many stories of hope found in the Bible. Abraham and Sarah were childless and well beyond childbearing age. Yet God promised them a son,

and in their old age they received a son. God delivered the Israelites from their living death of over four hundred years of slavery in Egypt. During the years of the judges, whenever a crisis would face Israel, God would raise a judge to deliver Israel. And of course there is that event which destroyed death, the last enemy as Paul described it, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the midst of our groaning God provides hope.

Joy taught a Sunday School class on an unprivileged area and in her class she had a timid, quiet nine-year-old named Barbara. Barbara's difficult home life had left her afraid and insecure. Barbara never spoke in class. When the other children would talk, she sat. While the others sang, she was silent. When the others giggled, she was quiet. Always present. Always listening. Always speechless. One day Joy taught about heaven. Joy talked about how there would be no tears in heaven, no death. Barbara was fascinated. She listened with hunger. Then she raised her hand. "Mrs Joy?" Joy was stunned. Barbara had never asked a question. "Yes, Barbara?" Is heaven for girls like me?" God's hope is for all us.

You may be familiar with the African American spiritual entitled "Dese Bones Gwine Rise Again." The refrain is, "I know it, deed I know it, Dese bones gwine rise again." In the midst of a world groaning, in the midst of a world in which we cannot escape death, this passage challenges us to read the bones and to see God restoring life, giving hope.

All authority and power and dominion
to the name that is above all names—
Jesus Christ our Lord—
now and in the age to come. Amen.