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Easter Vigil 2026

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Brunswick, ME

*The Spirit of the Lord set me down in the middle of a valley.*

Valley: a low area of land running between hills or mountains. Usually formed by rivers or streams over a very long period. Sometimes formed by glaciers. Types of valleys: cove, canyon, glen, gulch, hallow, vale.

I grew up in Arizona, in the Phoenix area, called the Valley of the Sun. If a geologic feature can be comforting, I would call a valley comforting, maternal, embracing. I grew up before most of the freeways were built. As I learned to drive, I could never get lost, the distinct mountain formations on every side orienting me to place.

Moving to upstate NY some 10 years ago, trees pressing in on every side and no visible horizon, I felt like a child lost in a Christmas tree lot.

A valley is a container, a ring of mountains encircling a large, open space rich with sediment and usually watered by a river. Because they are often hospitable to life, human beings tend to settle in valleys.

Ezekiel experiences his mystical vision in a valley. If the prophet had an actual valley in mind, it would have been in the Babylonian empire, where the Israelites were in exile. Some Judeans who led the revolt against the Babylonian invaders in Israel would have been imprisoned, others would have lived in rural areas working the land.

Some exiles assimilated a little too well for monotheism, adopting the religious practices of the oppressor. We hear about them in Ezekiel 14:3, "Mortal, these men have taken their idols into their hearts and placed their iniquity as a stumbling block before them; shall I let myself be consulted by them?"

The Lord sets Ezekiel in this dry valley, “full of bones. . . there were very many bones lying in the valley and they were very dry” (Ez 37:1-2).

*Very many....a vast slaughter of subjugated people ...very dry....the dead long forgotten* (Tubbs Tisdale and Sharp, *The Oxford Book of the Prophets*, 639). Where there is flesh and breath, there is hope of life. Grief is dry bones strewn across the land.

Verse 11: *They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’* Very dry bones? Despair.

Verse 12: *Therefore prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves.*

A valley of dry bones, a symbol of catastrophic grief and loss, calls forth God’s mercy, God’s Spirit. The hills surrounding the bones witness the splendor of resurrection. The valley which cradles the bones rejoices at their enlivening.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the monk Father Zossima divinizes creation telling Alyosha,

*”Love all of God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things”* (*The Brothers Karamazov*, 293).

Creation contains the divine mystery, this mystery also suffering the brunt of our sin, our excess, our consumerism, our war-mongering our destruction. Creation also rejoices at our restoration.

The Prophet Isaiah tells us,

*For you shall go out in joy  
and be led back in peace;*

*the mountains and the hills before you  
shall burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands (Isaiah 55: 12 )*

In Ezekiel God has promised a restored “communal future” to the powerless (Andrew Mein, *The Prophets*, 202). Ezekiel’s vision prefigures Christ’s resurrection, a promise of restoration with God for all humankind.

The God of the universe enfleshed in Jesus Christ met imprisonment, beating, torture, mocking all ending in a suffocating death. Scripture tells us even the earth quaked as Jesus breathed his last. The earth suffered with our God.

God through Ezekiel promises those suffering displacement and injustice and slaughter,  
“*Prophesy to these bones, listen to the word of the Lord...thus said the lord to these bones: I am about to bring breath into you and you shall live.....So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, a very very great legion*” (Ezekiel 37: 6-10).

Breath, *ruach* in the Hebrew, God’s restorative, rejuvenating, ordering, resurrecting breath. The same breath God breathed over the primeval chaos of the uncreated deep, hovering and fluttering like a bird over her young, to unleash the vast beauty of Creation. That same breath of God hovered over Jesus in the tomb, birthing Jesus out of death into life.

There is an old Catholic prayer that refers to this life as a valley of tears. But we know tears are not the last word. We know God can transform, revivify a valley. In this valley in which we find ourselves, amid rising authoritarianism and unjust war, we trust in the life-giving promise, oft-fulfilled of God. Psalm 104 reassures us,

*You send forth Your Spirit, and they are created;  
And You renew the face of the earth. (Psalm 104:30).*

Breathe on us, Breath of Life.

