It was a frightening picture for a little boy. During a family visit to Washington D.C., we stopped at the Catholic Basilica of the National Shrine because of my mom’s interest in church architecture and worship design. After a tour of the sanctuary, I most vividly recall going down to the crypt that was modeled after the Roman catacombs. At the entrance was a large panoramic picture of Ezekiel prophesying over the Valley of Dry Bone. The old prophet is standing on a rocky outcrop with his arms stretched out over a valley filled with a decomposing dead army. Some of the ragged skeletons are in the process of looking up, others are starting to stand, yet others are fully on their feet... very creepy for a little kid, especially as we were about to enter the catacombs.

There is something instinctively wrong with the idea of the dead coming back to life even though this is the cornerstone of our faith. But perhaps because we are in the grip of sin we have perverted this great promise from giving us the hope of new life to instead inspiring our worst fears and nightmares.

Mary Shelly conceived of the idea for her horror novel *Frankenstein*, about the dead being brought back to life, in 1816 during the infamous “summer that never was” caused by the volcanic eruption of Mt. Tambora in the Dutch East Indies. Volcanic ash blotted out the sun so much so that snow fell in July all over the US and Europe which led to massive crop failures. Many people thought it was surely the last days.

But Ezekiel’s vision was not met to inspire apocalyptic horror; rather it was created to give us hope. And not a moment too soon! Ezekiel lived and ministered at the same time as Jeremiah, who we met last week. Where Jeremiah came from the working class, Ezekiel was a priest of the holy Temple of Jerusalem, the center of faith for God’s people. His writings do not have the majestic sweep of Isaiah or the personal touch of an introspective Jeremiah. But what is unique about Ezekiel is how vividly he portrays the temple of Jerusalem as a symbol of God’s presences with his people and how by way of application, we are that living temple today. As I Cor. 3:16 says: “Don’t you know that you
yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?”

Ezekiel was part of the professional class whom the Babylonians saw as a potential threat to their dominance. So they are among the first group of exiles to be removed at the time a puppet government beholdin to Babylon was being set up in Judah. The exiles are resettled in a Babylonian province far, far away. They live for every scrap of information coming out of their homeland, hoping against hope they will be allowed to go home. Then came the electrifying news that Zedekiah, the puppet king, had rebelled and joined a revolutionary coalition. The exiles’ hopes soar.

But the Babylonians crush the rebel alliance like bugs and soon Jerusalem is besieged. As news trickled back to the exiles their hopes were on a rollercoaster. Surely God would not allow his people and the holy temple to be destroyed. Like in Hezekiah’s day there would be a last-minute rescue. But then in 586 BC the horrible news came that the walls had been breached, the city was plundered, the temple destroyed and the dead were beyond counting.

It was a monumental catastrophe, signaling the end of all hope. If you are reading straight through the Bible, you are probably getting tired of all these repetitive warnings of judgment and disaster. It becomes depressing and we are tempted to wonder why these people can’t just once heed the warnings and save themselves. It’s like when the movie “Titanic” came out some years ago. People were so caught up in the story they went and saw it over and over again. Perhaps they were thinking, maybe this time the boat can avoid that darned iceberg and this time Rose won’t have to let go of her beloved Jack as he slips under the waves. But no, the ship sinks every single time and Kate Winslet has to sing “My Heart Will Go On” over and over until it drives you crazy.

But let’s remember something that the Bible is taking great pains to get across to us: Before we can truly appreciate the good news of redemption, we have to understand the bad news of sin and failure. The siege of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, the exile of all the survivors to places far from home did seem like the end of the world to God’s people. All of these oft described events signal a massive failure on their part to retain their faith in God. There was the moment Ezekiel witnessed the glory of God departing from the Temple. This
appeared to be God abandoning his people forever. It was the point at the end of the sentence. It was over and done. The dead, whether individuals or nations, cannot come back and if they do, they come back only as misshapen monstrosities.

There is also another judgment mentioned repeatedly, the judgment meted out to all the nations surrounding Judah. God is not just a localized deity. He is everywhere involved and deals with every nation. Although it is curious that his judgment is a manner of degree. Ezekiel mentions how Tyre, which is a Canaanite city-state in what is now Lebanon, was also besieged. But they survive and the Babylonians are forced to retreat from the walls of their city. From a historical standpoint we know why this happened. Tyre was right on the coast; they had a navy while Babylon did not. So Tyre could resupply their city with fresh provisions and fresh troops from the sea while also evacuating their wounded and civilians. But the Bible suggests elsewhere that the real reason for their survival may have had more to do with their long peace with Judah. Still, at any rate, it didn’t seem fair that this pagan kingdom survived while God’s people seemed to be in the final stages of annihilation.

But this is just how things seemed to be. You know how it is for you. When you are beset by many problems it seems like there is only one way your life can go... straight down. You look around and see others so much better off than you. It is so easy to concentrate on the negative, give up hope and surrender to despair.

There is the story of the young man who wouldn’t get up one morning. His mom knocked on his bedroom door and said he had to get up or he would be late for school. The young man whined, “I hate school, the kids don’t like me and the teachers don’t respect me.” But his mom persisted. But you’ve got to get up to go.” “Why?” came the reply. “Well, I’ll give you two reasons,” his mom retorted, “You are 38 years old and you’re the principle.”

Sometimes we do just want to opt out. But despair never has the last word in God’s economy. By way of a vision, God brings Ezekiel to the imaginary site of a long ago battlefield. The bodies have been left where they fell and now they are only piles of bones. Such a scene was repeated in reality in AD 9 when three Roman legions of 15-20,000 men under the incompetent General
Varus entered the German Teutoberg Forest. They were ambushed by the German tribes while strung out on the line of march. Very few survived. A generation later a Roman chronicler was part of an expedition back to that same forest and he describes in macabre detail an army of skeletons in rusted armor laying all along the forest trail.

But Ezekiel’s army would not be allowed to molder into dust. God asks the prophet: “Son of man, can these bones live?” A few years back I stood over the memorial site of my wife and asked can anything be done about an increasingly complex and soulless medical system that many good doctors are thoroughly frustrated with, a system that is becoming ever more about financial profits and less about the well-being and safety of the patients who entrust their lives to it. I wonder if I could have heard the voice of God say, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

That’s a good question for all of us. When life seems to hit a wall and you are faced with discouragement and woe, do you hear the voice of God asking you, “Son of man, can these bones live?” When your job seems like a dead end and you realize you are putting 35-40 years into something you really don’t care to do, do you hear the voice of God asking: “Son of man, can these bones live?” When you’re at loggerheads with your spouse or children and it doesn’t seem like things are going to get any better, do you hear the voice of God asking: “Son of man, can these bones live?

When you read of the forests burning out West, the weather all over the globe becoming more extreme and millions of refugees fleeing the armies of Islam while the world sits by and does practically nothing, do you hear God asking: “Son of man, can these bones live?” When you realize once again because of some horrific news item such as the gunning down of the young woman reporter on live TV, that we are a nation so accommodated to mindless violence that even the murder of a whole classroom of small children at Sandy Hook doesn’t stir us enough to demand any real solutions to our escalating gun violence. Do you hear God asking: “Son of man, can these bones live?”

Just when the exiles back in 586 BC were tempted to give into their despair, Ezekiel suddenly changes his message. Through him, God now says to his people: “Look, things happen for reason you sometimes
understand but just as often they happen for reasons you will never figure out. In many ways this is not a pretty world. There is evil, injustice, heartache and death all around. It is not like in the stories where the good guys always win and the bad guys get their just desserts. But hear this oh my beloved people: Don’t ever give up. I always have the last word over everything that happens. It may not make any sense to you when you are going through it, but it makes sense to me. Trust me. Someday your hope will be realized. Maybe not you, but your children and grandchildren will be able to return home and start afresh. The dry bones of your shattered hopes and dreams can and will live again if they are good and godly dreams. Maybe not in the way you expected, maybe not in the timing you wanted, but the dry bones of your deepest longings will live again!

Starting in chapter 40 Ezekiel would now describe in great detail the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem and the return of God’s glory to the inner sanctuary of the temple. He would also describe the return of all the tribes to their ancestral land.

Of course this would never happen, at least on the scale Ezekiel envisioned. The temple would be rebuilt a generation later, but it would be a somewhat sad and shabby affair, only a shadow of its former magnificence. The people would return, but they would lack a tribal identity and only inhabit a sliver of their former territory and politically never be anything more than a backwater of first the Persian Empire and then the Greek Empire and finally the Roman Empire, until they were once again destroyed in AD 70.

But Ezekiel’s vision encompassed more than just the fortunes of a tiny Jewish state. To prove to us all that he is as good as his word, God came into the world as a human being. Over and over again he delivered people out of impossible situations. He lifted them out of hopeless circumstances; he rescued them out of overwhelming troubles. He even took on death itself and soundly defeated it with a shout of triumph on Easter morning.

Ezekiel’s temple vision really has more to do with a greater Kingdom that is now in our midst, and which was announced by our Lord Jesus Christ when he ushered in his ministry with the declaration: “The time has come, the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good
news!” (Mark 1:15). This Kingdom is not just for the people of Bible times, it is for people now, for any who wish to enter it through faith, trust and obedience in Jesus Christ.

In chapter 47 Ezekiel is taken on a tour of the heavenly temple by an angel guide. He is shown a river flowing out of the temple. Ezekiel is first asked to step into the water and he finds it is ankle-deep. Then he is asked to step in at another place and it is knee-deep. And then another place that is waist-deep. And finally Ezekiel is asked to enter water that is over his head and he has to swim. In a land where rivers tend to be piddly affairs and often dry up all-together, this is a vision of tremendous abundance. Then Ezekiel’s attention is called to all the verdant life along the river, especially the trees with “leaves that will not wither, nor will their fruit fail... and their leaves are for healing.”

Of course this harkens back to Eden with its tree of life we have now lost access to and the paradise we once knew but know not where it is to be found any longer. Now we are given the way back to Eden. This is such a compelling vision that the apostle John borrows it and folds it into his imagery for the new heaven and the new earth in the Book of Revelation.

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (22:1, 2).

So what is our response to all of this? Winston Churchill was invited to speak at a college commencement during the darkest days of World War II. His speech was very short. This man, with the bearing of a bulldog, simply said: "Never give in, never give in, never; never; never; never - in nothing, great or small, large or petty - never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense"

So whatever your circumstance, whether you are happy or sad, whether your life is working as hoped or not going well at all, whether the nations rage or peace is breaking out, know that it is worth it all. Your life counts, the life of everyone counts. This why we are to care for one another with such great tenderness, this is why we take the risk of inviting others to join us on the road of faith.

Sometimes despite total exhaustion of body and soul, you can always take
the next step forward and never give up hope. Why? Because as our friend Ezekiel is saying: Our journey is toward a destination whose name is wonderful. We are finding our way back to Paradise.