

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
The Story Isn't Finished
March 22, 2026
Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1-45

I remember lying in the back of an ambulance, unable to see, uncertain about my injuries, and wondering if perhaps this was going to be the end of my story. In that moment, the future I had imagined for myself felt impossible.

Perhaps you've been there. Not in an abstract way. Not as part of an academic inquiry or a theological puzzle. But, rather, in a deeply personal lived experience that arrived as an unexpected life challenge, bringing into question the future you had planned. Something so abrupt that you could only ask, "Is this where my story ends?"

This hard question is one we usually don't seek out, but it is also one we all must confront. And, it is a question that we should ask of both of this morning's texts. In both Ezekiel and John, today's stories begin with a situation that feels like it is the end.

Let's start with Ezekiel. No matter how you look at it, this is a bizarre scene. It's also one of the most unforgettable images in the Bible. The prophet is placed in the middle of a valley that is filled with bones. Dry bones. Long dead bones.

And, God gets things going with a question that seems inappropriate and goes well beyond what we have been taught is okay to ask when surrounded by so much death. God asks, "Can these bones live?"¹

Ezekiel gives what might be the most honest answer in the Bible, "Lord God, only you know."²

Dr. Brent Strawn, Professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity School explains, "The second person independent pronoun "you" in this verse is unnecessary in Hebrew and may signal emphasis

¹ Ezekiel 37:3, RSV

² Ezekiel 37:3, NCV

in some fashion. Perhaps a paraphrase that approaches the tone is: “You may know the answer to that question, Lord; I definitely don’t!”³

Let’s be real. From the human perspective, the answer is a hard “no.” A bunch of bones that have long been detached from one another and separated from bodies that once contained them cannot come back to life. That isn’t how gravesites work.

But in racing to offer this logical answer, we have missed something important. This story isn’t primarily about individuals. It is about a people. It is about a nation.

Ezekiel is speaking to Israel in exile. Their nation has been conquered. Their temple destroyed. Their identity shattered. Everything that once gave them life and meaning is gone.

It is bad situation. Really bad. They are not just discouraged; they are convinced their story is over.

In fact, just a few verses later, the people themselves say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.”⁴ This is the voice of a people who believe their story has ended.

Even so, God knows there is yet more to come. God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy. God invites him to speak directly to the bones, to prophesy to what appears lifeless, and to trust that God is not finished.

Only after Ezekiel demonstrates his obedience do things begin to happen. The strange sounds begin. We hear an unfamiliar rattling noise as bone joins with bone and as sinew and flesh appear. And, then, the final prophesy commands God’s very breath to enter these new re-formed beings.

And, when the breath of God arrives that which was dead lives again. This is not simply about individuals being put back

³ Brent A. Strawn. Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14, Working Preacher, December 10, 2017, available from <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/ezekiel-valley-of-dry-bones/commentary-on-ezekiel-371-14-3>

⁴ Ezekiel 37:11, RSV

together; it is about a people who thought their story had ended learning otherwise. They now know a future is possible.

Go ahead and hold on to that image while we consider the second story from John's Gospel. Once again, it starts with what sounds like the end of a story.

Lazarus is not barely hanging on. He is not somewhat dead. He is dead dead. Four days in the tomb dead. Dead long enough that "there is a stench."⁵

But rather than responding with haste, Jesus delays. Upon learning Lazarus is seriously ill, he chooses to wait. He lets the sickness run its course knowing that it won't end well.

When Jesus finally arrives, everyone is mourning. The loss of Lazarus is overwhelming them.

Imagine the emotion in Martha's voice when she greets Jesus. The first words out of her mouth are, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."⁶

She isn't alone. Just a few verses later, Mary, delivers the same greeting, word for word.⁷

You can hear it, can't you? The "if only." The "it didn't have to end this way." The "but this isn't how the story was supposed to end."

And then Jesus goes to the tomb. Jesus is moved. He weeps. He prays. And only after those very human emotional experiences does he cry out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"⁸

While I've read this story many times over the years, this week I found myself wondering something new. I wondered what those who were gathered were thinking when they heard these unexpected words come from Jesus' mouth. And I wondered how

⁵ John 11:39, The Message

⁶ John 11:21, RSV

⁷ John 11:32, RSV

⁸ John 11:43, RSV

long the silence was after he finished speaking. Was this the longest and most awkward silence anyone had ever experienced? Did it feel cruel and unnecessary? Were they still answering questions like these in their as he exited his tomb?

John simply tells us that the dead man came out. The dead, still bandaged man, came out of the tomb. He walked out of the grave.

Lazarus' life story was complete, until it wasn't. This is a story about a man who died and was brought back to life by Jesus. And, it clearly teaches us that his story wasn't finished yet.

It also introduces us to a side of Jesus that we will be learning more about as we journey toward Easter. Jesus is the one who says of himself, "I am the resurrection and the life."⁹

The folks who organized the lectionary wanted us to hear these stories together: Ezekiel and the dry bones alongside Jesus and Lazarus. Both are clear declarations that death doesn't get the last word. Both are less than subtle reminders that our human wisdom has clear limits. Both remind us that when we assume our story has a clear path to the finish line or is already there, God may surprise us with news that our story isn't finished.

And that brings me back to that moment in the ambulance. In that moment I had no idea how or even if my story would continue.

Since it looks like I'll be your Interim Minister for a while, it might help to know me a little better . . . so I want to share this part of my story with you openly.

It had been a rather ordinary work day for me at the White Rock Center of Hope in East Dallas. It was later in the day, after we had finished serving neighbors in need. At this point the Food Pantry and Clothing Closet were quiet. The volunteers had finished serving and gone home.

⁹ John 11:25, RSV

Somehow, someone appeared in my office. He came intent on doing me harm. His fists struck me over and over again, contacting my head and chest. His words made clear his goal was to end my life.

Laying defenseless on the floor I was relieved when the blows finally paused. And I summoned what little remained of my strength to scream for help. My attacker responded by striking me once more, then all I heard his footsteps as he walked then ran away.

Soon I was taken to a nearby hospital for treatment only to learn they could not help me. They placed me in an ambulance to send me to a hospital with a Level 1 Trauma Center. As I took what felt like the longest ride of my life I was in considerable pain and had lost my vision. I didn't know whether I would make it. And, I had no idea if I would ever see again.

This was a moment when I realized just how fragile life is. Looking back, I now know it started a new journey that would take quite some time to develop.

Now, three and a half years later, I have a story to tell. While I will always bear some scars from this experience, I did recover and my sight was restored. And, through this ordeal, God breathed new life into me. God called me out of what had been and into what could become.

The experience emboldened me. It opened my heart and my eyes in ways I would not have chosen, but for which I am deeply grateful.

Some people have asked me, "How could you go back to the White Rock Center of Hope after something like that?"

And my answer is simple, "I knew that story wasn't finished." In the years since the attack, the ministry of Hope has more than doubled in size. With the help of 50 churches and community partners and more than 1,500 volunteers, last year Hope served twice as many people as any year in our 38-year history. We

provided food, clothing, and empowerment to nearly 15,000 neighbors in our community.

That alone could be the rest of the story, but it is only a part of what followed. It propelled me forward in my faith, leading me to ordination in the United Church of Christ. And, that ordination enabled me to become a candidate to serve as your Interim Minister. It turns out the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ are in full communion, which means, among other things, that they can share clergy.

It also means I can reconnect with the Disciples part of my story. When I stepped away from serving as an Associate Minister at First Christian Church in downtown Garland, Texas more than 20 years ago I thought my Disciples experience was complete. Now, I see that it wasn't finished.

This is who I am and some of how I got here. It is my dry bones experience. It is my Lazarus' testimony.

And it reminds me that we have all been called to be part of this community, First Christian. We are an historic church. We are a faithful church. And, like every church, we are in a time of transition.

It's okay to feel uncertain. It's okay to hope. It's okay to ask what comes next. But here is the good news: the story isn't finished. The same Spirit that breathed life into dry bones and called Lazarus out of the tomb is here. God is not done.

I wonder where you see God bringing something new to life and I wonder how you will choose to join in. Amen.