

**Bone-Rattling Faith**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-14**  
**March 26, 2023**  
**Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church**  
**Grand Rapids MI**

Howard Thurman once said, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do that, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive.”

I read those words this week for the first time and it stopped me in my tracks. You see since coming to East Church I have been looking around at Grand Rapids, at Eastown, at Ottawa Hills and even here at East Church with the burning question “What are the needs in the community we can seek after to help meet? What do we as a congregation feel called to be our mission? When we talk about mission, we are implying that we are called to be involved in something that has a positive impact on people. Now if I were to ask each of you what East Church is called or what is our mission, I am pretty sure that I would hear a wide range of answers. We may point to our beautiful sanctuary and music and say that we are called to offer a place of spiritual refuge that lifts people’s spirits through the worship of God. We may point to our twenty-five years of ministry with Family Promise and IHN and say we are called to meet the housing needs of families. We may point to the rainbow flag outside and say we are called to be a place where all are welcomed, loved and affirmed as beloved children of God. We may point to one another and say we are called to be a place for families of all kinds that build bonds of faithful service together. Some of us might point to one of the many other justice ministries we focus on - Eco-justice, food security, Racial Justice and so forth - and say we are here to help create a more just and equitable world.

I am here to tell you that Yes, we are all about these things. Yes, these are many of the things that God has called this community of faith to do time and time again over the ages.

We could even reverse the question and ask, what does East Church need? Perhaps you would say, "We need more members." Or "We need generous people who love East Church." Or maybe we would say, "We need more creative and talented people to volunteer their time." Maybe we would say, "we need a different style of worship to attract younger members." Or even some may say, "we need to sell or revamp the church so it can be used by other organizations." Again, all these things are real and good ideas to explore. But are these the right kind of questions we need to be asking?

When I read this quote from Howard Thurman, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do that, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive." I realized that there is always a need. A need in the community we may feel burdened with to help address or a need we seek to help us feel fulfilled as a faith community or even as an individual. But maybe this is not the best question we can be asking about ourselves. No one wants to be wanted for what need we can fulfill, but we want relationships, connection to one another and to God that reminds us that there is a reason to live. We want to be alive.

The people of Israel that we hear about in Ezekiel today have been taken off into Babylonian captivity. They have lost their sense of meaning in the world in part because their identity was tied to their country and that had been violently taken from them. They lost their homeland and their dignity and now they feel dead inside. They have lost all hope. Ezekiel is given this vision to help the people find hope again. Prophets in scripture are the truth-tellers. They speak truth to power to call leaders or people to account. They also speak truth to the downtrodden and despondent to encourage them to hope in God again.

The people had lost all hope and it was as real as these dry bones that Ezekiel was standing on. These dead people were forgotten and left without dignity and no one to mourn their deaths. Nothing is more final than death. So, looking over this valley of sun-bleached bones it sounds preposterous to have God ask, “Can these bones live?” I love Ezekiel’s response. He can’t, in good faith say, “Yes God most definitely.” And he certainly can’t say “No God that is impossible.” Instead, he says “God only you know if it can happen?” The prophet himself is unable to muster the faith. So, God commands the Prophet to say the words. He prophesies and everything happens except the breath entering the bodies. They are standing there waiting not only for God but for Ezekiel to finish what had begun. Again, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy and call for the winds of God to breath life into the bodies.

We may feel alive because we are going through the motions and doing what we think God wants. But still I hear people saying, “I am so tired, I am worn out, I am not feeling fulfilled by what I am doing.” We feel like we are doing more and more and yet just spinning our wheels. I get that, I really do. We may look alive, but we need God’s spirit to give us life. That’s where this statement from Howard Thurman comes in. I think we have been asking the wrong questions about our church. We should be asking. What makes us come alive? What fills our spirits with life and enlivens us? There are so many things happening in the world around us that rob us of life, that make us feel dead inside. So, let’s stop for a moment and ask a new kind of question, “what here at East is giving you life? What in your daily and spiritual life makes you get excited, rattles your bones and fills you with hope, joy, love? You know the life-giving gifts of God? What are you involved in either here or outside the church that gives you hope? What is filling your spiritual lungs with air?

I sat with this question this week and pondered about when I feel the most energized about serving East Church. Some of the things that came to mind were – my pastoral visits and getting to know people, meeting with the different organizations in our

building and seeking ways to work together. The Enneagram classes I have led give me life as I see people deepen their own awareness and desire to be better people. But the first immediate thought went to the interfaith dinners. At the end of the night the fellowship hall is charged with amazing energy. Smiles, engaging conversations, interesting presenters, and lots of new faces eager to meet others. What I have noticed is that people are hungry for this kind of friendly exchange of connection and learning with new people. While the world around us is being polarized and building up walls of us versus them, right and wrong, good or bad. Here at East Church, we are trying to build bridges and discover what we have in common.

At our last dinner I really appreciated how our speaker, Simin Beg, encouraged us to have Humiosity. To be humble and curious. Humble enough to realize we don't know everything and curious enough to want to explore and learn. There are a lot of people out there just defending what they think is right or at least what others tell them is right and we throw up walls to defend that position. But what if we were more like Ezekiel and be a little more hesitant on what we think we know and be curious to see what God can do. Maybe we take time to hear from others about their lived experience and gain some perspective on things from their point of view.

Let us, as individuals and members of East Church, pray for the Spirit of God to breathe life into us and others around us. Let us practice Humiosity with one another and remain open hearted when the world is feeling so divisive. Let us ask ourselves and this community of faith, "What makes us come alive?" and share that with people around us. Let us be people of the resurrection and breathe the breath of God into dry bones.

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