

The grace, mercy, and peace of God: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, be yours this Pentecost day. The title for today's sermon is 'Standing in a cemetery' and is based on today's first two readings, from Ezekiel chapter 37 and Acts chapter 2. Let us pray... Amen.

By the time I arrived Churchbridge I had already stood in my fair share of cemeteries. Standing in each, listening, looking, reading the history of the people, they intrigued me, though it was not always at way.

Growing up in Peace River, there was a cemetery only a few blocks from my house. It was up and over a little hill, and tucked back where most people wouldn't see it. It was quiet. It was out of the way. I found it peacefully . . . creepy. I didn't like to go to the cemetery because there were dead people there. When I did go, as kids will do, I usually went with friends, because if something happened, I could run faster scared. All kidding aside, my problem was I'd heard all kinds of spooky and creepy stories about cemeteries, I'd seen movies with cemeteries, and they never ended very well, at least for the living.

Yet walking among the dead, seeing the all the grave makers, and knowing there were bodies inside, the words "can these bones ever really live again?" was a thought which went through my head. Would they rise up like an invading zombie army? Would they climb out of their graves as depicted in some horror movies I wasn't supposed to watch? While there I was scared of talking too loud because someone might hear me, and even more, answer me. Then what would I say, mainly to a dead person in a cemetery? And what if those bodies actually did rise from the dead, then what would I do, what would I say? Looking back, I can smile at how naive I was.

Yet, as much as I didn't like standing in a cemetery, I had a fascination with wars and warfare. Well at least I did until I saw the real inhumanity of war. In about 1987 my fascination started to change. I no longer got as excited with large scale confrontations and death and destruction. Part of the reason was I walked through Auschwitz, the WWII concentration camp located in modern day Poland. I stood in the camp, or you could say cemetery, for the number of people killed and disposed there was haunting. Around one million people, the equivalent population of Saskatchewan today, were executed in this one camp in the 5 years it operated. If you are doing the math in your head, it works out to about 545-550 people a day, seven days a week, every single day it operated. Standing in that cemetery called Auschwitz and seeing where so many people took their last breath was incredibly more haunting than standing in the cemetery back home. It was haunting, not because I thought the ghosts of the dead might come back; it was haunting because the enormous cruelty and death toll. One million people. Today, inside the fences of Auschwitz there stands an urn with the ashes collected from the crematory furnaces after it was liberated. The sights still lingers in the back of my mind. I am still shocked at how cruel people can be to each other, not just killing each other, but to deny the necessities of

life just to watch people die. Looking back at Auschwitz, and to our Old Testament reading, the words: **"Son of man, can these bones live?" and 'Oh Lord God, you know'"**(Ezekiel 37:3) bounce around in my head. That cemetery changed me forever.

As I grew older, I continued to visit cemeteries. I also continue looking at old conflicts, battles, and wars. One way is by talking to veterans and survivors of different conflicts, mostly from WWII, but also Korea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Yugoslavia, Burundi, and some other locations. Sometimes I am too late to talk to those who lived through the conflict, so I will talk with their widows. I had a couple of conversations with the wives of two Canadian soldiers who fought at Dieppe. Over 6,000 soldiers attacked the beach. By the end of the day, 60% of the Canadian soldiers who fought, and who lost, were killed or captured. Both of these men survived the battle. One was able to retreat while the other was captured and spent the next two and a half years in a German POW camp. Both wives recounted their husband's experience of standing among the dead. Dead bodies of both friends and enemies were lying scattered everywhere. It was a horrific sight at that newly formed coastal cemetery.

Now you might be wondering what standing in cemeteries, war, and senseless loss of life have to do with Pentecost? I'll venture to say everything. While the usual focus on Pentecost Day are the flaming tongues of Jesus' disciples or on those same disciples speaking in various tongues, what's missed is who the disciples were speaking to: dry bones. The disciples were surrounded by death, they were standing in the cemetery called Jerusalem. They were surrounded by the dead, dry bones of the residents of Jerusalem. John tells us **"Whoever believes in the Son of God has life; whoever does not believe in the Son of God does not have life."**(1 John 5:12). Paul furthers says **"how can they believe in whom they've never heard"**(Romans 10:14). Peter and the other apostles saw spiritually what Ezekiel witnessed in today's Old Testament reading and were called to proclaim Christ, His Gospel, and His life for them.

On that first Pentecost, the disciples were gathered together in one place(Acts 2:1), and the Spirit of the Lord set them down in the middle of the Jerusalem: it was full of bones. There were the bones of **"<sup>9</sup>Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, <sup>11</sup>both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians"** and behold they were dry."<sup>3</sup> And God said to Peter, **"Son of man, can these bones live?"** And he answered, **"O Lord GOD, you know."**<sup>4</sup> Then God said to them, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD."<sup>5</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones. And Peter spoke.

Now you might ask, 'how does this apply to us today? We are nothing like those twelve disciples that day. They had Jesus breathe on them and He gave them the Holy Spirit. They

were commissioned by Christ Himself to proclaim His saving Gospel to the world. They had tongues of fire on their heads and they were speaking in all kinds of different tongues so everyone who heard them could understand the Gospel in their own language. They had the Holy Spirit working in them in ways we can only imagine.' .... Well, that is in part true. They did have tongues of fire on their heads, which would have been really cool, but God has given you everything else in varying degrees. You had the Holy Spirit breathed into you in the waters of Holy Baptism, and thereby were given saving faith in Christ. You have the Gospel--the Word of God--proclaimed into your ears, it is on your lips, and if all else fails it is in black and white in Holy Scripture for you to read and enjoy whenever you want. You are, as Peter declares: "**a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of *death* into His marvelous *Life*."**(1 Peter 2:9) This is exactly what Peter did in Jerusalem and 3000 were raised to eternal life that day!

Through the Gospel, "**the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,**"(Romans 1:16) God has raised you from eternal and spiritual death to new and eternal life in Jesus. In Holy Baptism the Holy Spirit breathed Christ's eternal life into your formerly dead dry bones and recreated you as His very own! You are no longer one of the residents of this cemetery called earth under the power of Satan, you now are a resident of heaven and eternal life in Christ Jesus on account of Christ Jesus death on the cross for you and through His resurrection. The Holy Spirit brings you this gift of eternal life through God's Means of Grace: solely through God's Word and Sacrament. Jesus tells us since "**He has given us His Word, the world now hates us *Christians* because we are not of the world, just as He is not of the world.**"(John 17:14)

Yet, we still live and stand in a cemetery. We live among the dead. We often don't think of it that way, and they just don't know it yet. In this area of Canada there are very few Parthians and Medes and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, but there are many Canadians and residents of Churchbridge, Langenburg, Bredenbury, and Esterhazy. You don't have to go to the Churchbridge cemetery to find people dead in their sins, you simply need to visit the Co-op, the post office, school, or other area of town. This is because anyone who does not hear God's Word or believe in Christ as their only Saviour remains as dead as the bones in the valley of death. Those who do not believe in Christ and His salvation for them are self-condemned, lost, and spiritually dead. **Yet** those who do hear the Gospel, in them the Holy Spirit does work, and in His own time, breathes Christ's eternal life into their dead bodies and created faith. Gathered around Christ's Word and Sacrament we are fed and strengthened to go out into the world around us with Jesus' life.

And as Peter boldly proclaimed God's Word, we too have the privilege to boldly share it with everyone around us. As Jesus called Peter and the other disciples to be His witnesses, Jesus also calls you through the Holy Spirit, to be His witness in this world.

Going back to those two Canadian soldiers who fought at Dieppe, both of them were nominal Christians before being deployed, rarely if ever even hearing Christ's Gospel. For the one who was captured, Christ, His Word, and His church were 'a crutch for those who were weak.' His wife told me he was almost spiritually dead before being deployed. It took her refusal to be his wife until he memorized one Psalm that he even opened a Bible. I asked this widow if the experience of living in a POW camp for two plus years damaged her husband's faith in God and she answered boldly 'absolutely not'. It crushed his faith in people, but solidified his faith in God. Christ, His Word, and His church were no longer 'a crutch for the weak' but 'life for those who were dead'. In fact, both wives said that after their husband's returned home they couldn't keep them from Christ, His Word, or His Church, or stop them from talking about Jesus; His forgiveness, grace, and eternal life.

They'd seen death. They stood among the dead. They realized the urgency of sharing Christ's Gospel. Your salvation is already assured by Christ's life, His death on the cross for you, and through His resurrection. God breathed His new and eternal life into your body and soul. He has also equipped you with His Word--the Gospel--to share with everyone around you, no matter where they are from or what they've done. Jesus poured the same blood out to pay for your sins, as He did to pay for the sins of the whole world(*1 John 2:2*). In Christ there is life. In Christ there is comfort, forgiveness, grace, and a real hope. The best news is it is absolutely free for you and for everyone.

Out in the world you will be surrounded by spiritually dead people. Listen to God's question: “**Son of man, can these bones live?**” You can boldly answer, “**O Lord GOD, you know.**” Together we have received the gift of Christ's eternal life. Together we also have the calling and privilege of sharing Christ's gift of life, His gift of forgiveness, and His gift of our salvation with the world around us.

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