In the Book of Proverbs King Solomon wrote, “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.” What are dry bones? They are bones which are weak, and brittle, and easily broken. It’s interesting that Solomon says a crushed spirit results in dry bones. A crushed spirit can be the result of many things. In our day it is often caused by stress. Undue stress, whether real or merely imagined, is a powerful force. It can leave you feeling all dragged out - feeling helpless and useless - searching to find a reason for your existence. Excessive stress has even led some people to the point of despair. That’s what can happen when your spirit has been crushed - and at the time of our text, God’s people were having some severe spiritual problems - problems which could easily have led them to despair. But today, we will see how God led His people From Death To Life, through the power of His Word.

Allow me to give you a little background. At the time of our text, God’s people (including Ezekiel himself) were in exile in the land of Babylon. Over 100 years earlier, the Ten Northern Tribes of the Children of Israel had been carried off to Assyria, never to return. But now Babylon had taken over the military supremacy of the world. It started in 612 BC, when King Nebuchadnezzar had defeated the Assyrians in battle. Seven years later, he destroyed the last real threat to his world supremacy when he defeated the Pharaoh of Egypt. It was at that time, as Nebuchadnezzar was on his way back home, that he deported to Babylon the brightest and the best of God’s people from the land of Judah.

A second deportation would take place just eight years later - a deportation which would include the Prophet Ezekiel. Now, as bad as all this may sound, the people of Judah still remained hopeful. After all, their capital city, Jerusalem, was still intact. Since Jerusalem was located on high almost unapproachable ground, and since it was surrounded by a series of strong walls, the people were confident that it would certainly stand forever. They continued to cling to that hope until that dreaded day when the impossible actually happened. Jerusalem had fallen - and even the LORD’s temple itself lay in ruins! At that point, the spirit of God’s people had been utterly crushed.

Such was the situation when the LORD came to Ezekiel and showed him the vision of the valley of dry bones. God would use this visual story to bring encouragement to His despairing people. Ezekiel began with these words, “The hand of the LORD was upon me. He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley, which was full of bones. He had me pass
through them and go all over among them. There were very many on the valley floor, and they were very dry. He said to me, ‘Son of man, can these dry bones live?’ I answered, ‘LORD God, you know.’”

God was calling on Ezekiel to use his powers of observation, and to study closely a valley filled with bones. As he did so, two things became obvious to Ezekiel. The first problem was that the bones were scattered all over, with absolutely no order to them. The second problem was that the bones were very dry - lifeless and brittle. After noting these problems the LORD asked him, “Son of man, can these dry bones live?” What would you have answered? Regardless of how much or how little you know about human anatomy, is there any way to make a pile of dried up bones come to life? If there is, only God knows what it is - and that’s exactly what Ezekiel said.

It was at that time that the LORD proceeded to show Ezekiel how it could be done. He said, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.’ This is what the LORD God says to these bones. I am about to make breath enter you so that you will live. I will attach tendons to you. I will put flesh back on you. I will cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you will live. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’” Ezekiel was to prophesy - to preach to the bones! Now, you may be thinking to yourself, “What good was it going to do to preach to a pile of dry old bones?” - and perhaps Ezekiel himself was wondering the same thing. From a strictly human perspective, preaching to dry bones would be about as effective as watering a broomstick to make it grow. It would achieve the same results as talking to a brick wall. But from a Christian perspective, God and His Word offer the only possible solution. The Bible tells us that, “With God, all things are possible.”

Now before we look at the results of Ezekiel’s preaching, I’d like you to think about the fact that God had not required any results from him. God had not said, “Ezekiel, you try to put these bones together - you try to assemble them into a mighty, living army for Me.” Instead God had said, “You prophesy ... and I will do the rest.” Sometimes - perhaps all too often - we put the cart before the horse. We try to comfort the sick, or convert the unbeliever, or regain the straying Christian. We try, with our caring, and knowledge, and experience, and ability. But we must remember that if we don’t use God’s Word, there is no guarantee that the results we desire will actually occur - no matter how hard we try.

Well, Ezekiel did as he had been commanded by the LORD - and the results were astounding! He continues, “As I was prophesying there was a noise, a
rattling, as the bones came together, one bone connecting to another. As I watched, tendons were attached to them, then flesh grew over them, and skin covered them. But there was no breath in them.” Ezekiel’s account is reminiscent of God’s creation of Adam back in Genesis, Chapter 2. There God took the dust of the ground and shaped it into a human form. But there was no breath in that form either - not until God had breathed into him the breath of life - then and only then, did man become a living being. It is through the breath of God - the Spirit of God - that we truly become alive. Ezekiel tells us that those dry bones became a powerful army - an army which was fully equipped to do the LORD’s will.

But what about the Israelites? In the previous chapter, God had assured the Israelites that even though they were in exile now, their situation was about to change. He said, “But you, O mountains of Israel, will shoot forth your branches and bear your fruit for my people Israel, because they will soon come back.” Nevertheless, because of all the things I mentioned earlier - including the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of God’s temple - the Israelites were finding it hard to believe God’s promise. In our text they cried out, “Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off.” So what did God do to pull them out of their despair? He sent them prophets like Ezekiel, to keep repeating God’s messages until they finally sunk in. At the conclusion of our text Ezekiel told the people, “This is what the LORD God says. My people, I am going to open your graves and raise you up from your graves and bring you back to the soil of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live. I will settle you on your own land, and you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.”

The LORD did exactly what He promised to do for the Israelites. It was roughly 35 years later, under the rule of Cyrus the Persian, that God enabled the Israelites to return to their homeland - the Promised Land. They returned in order to serve the LORD - by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and more importantly, by rebuilding the LORD’s temple and reestablishing worship in the land.

The only thing which is remaining for us to look at this morning is how the vision of the valley of dry bones applies to us. Perhaps the Apostle Paul had this vision in mind when he wrote these words to the Ephesians, “You were dead in your trespasses and sins.” Those bones in Ezekiel’s vision were dead - dried out - completely without life. They were incapable of doing anything for the LORD. The Israelites, whom the bones represented, were in captivity, far removed from their homeland. Jerusalem had been destroyed, and even God’s temple lay in ruins. Their
spirit had been utterly crushed. And sin has left us in the same condition. We were just a bunch of hopeless, helpless, dry bones.

But God took those dry bones in the vision, and He brought them back to life, fashioning them into a vast army. God also took those despondent Israelites, and sent them prophets like Ezekiel, to revive their hope, and to prepare them for their return to the Promised Land. God has also taken us in our sinful condition, and has given us new life through His Word and Sacraments. Again Paul told the Ephesians, “He made us alive with Christ ... So then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household. You have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief Cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you too are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” Dear friends, the Holy Spirit lives in us. He has already taken us From Death To Life through the power of God’s Word. May He continue to revive our dry bones - keeping our faith from becoming weak and brittle - and fully equipping us to live our lives for the LORD. Amen.