I.
My friend Greg and his wife Suzy moved back to their hometown of Greenville, SC a few years ago when Greg was called to be the pastor of a church there. I guess he was proving that you can go home again. They found a house there they wanted to buy, but to say it was a fixer upper was a huge understatement. It hadn’t been updated since it was built fifty-five years ago. Hoarders had lived there… homeless people had squatted there…and they hadn’t had electricity or running water. It had almost been condemned. Suzy and Greg walked through it with a good friend of their’s to show her the house – the doors falling off the hinges, the linoleum floors peeling up, the mildew, the mold, the smell. The friend held their son, Yates, who was about nine months old, clutching him tightly and shaking her head and saying over and over, “You can’t buy this house. Yates can’t live here. You can’t let Yates live here.” But Suzy said, “I know it’s overwhelming, and I know we’ve got to do a lot of work, but it’s got good bones.” In order for a house like that to be put back together, you have to have good bones. But, for the house we are concerned with today, the house this vision from Ezekiel is concerned with, there’s more.

Nathan Stucky is the director of the Farminary at Princeton Seminary. Back in 2010, Princeton Seminary purchased a plot of land from a Christmas tree farmer, who himself had purchased the land some 15 years prior from a sod farmer. For decades, that land had been used to generate the “crop” of sod, where over a 14-month period, grass seeds grow forth into a lovely lawn. Then a large sod-harvesting machine peels back the grass from the ground, almost like you might peel skin from an apple. That grass then is taken all around – to suburban homes, football fields, you name it – wherever one needs an instant lawn. And so for decades, this plot of land in Princeton, New Jersey had produced yards and yards of yard!
slowly but certainly depriving the ground of the very nutrients and fertility it needs to be a source of abundance. Nathan describes the work, then, of the Farminary to “restore vitality to the soil.” On the same patch of land where crews of people had perpetually stripped the soil of its fertility, a motley crew of seminarians practice the patient and persistent work of composting. Nathan calls composting “the gateway to new life,”— taking that which has died and using it to breathe a holy breath into this valley of dry land. Where once the ground was valued simply by what it could produce, the Farminary seeks to make this land the most vital in Mercer County, reconnecting the ecosystem of plant and people, land and living things, communion with community that bears witness to new life. In this way, the Farminary speaks prophetically to the churches its seminarians will one day serve, reminding Christ-filled communities that we have been given the promise of resurrection! No longer must we cling to the way things have always been, no longer must we measure the success of our churches merely by what they can produce, no longer must our churches strip and squeeze resources out of a depleted landscape. For we are Easter people, people of abundance and new life and resurrection! Church is meant to be a fertile soil... an abundant environment for disciples to grow. You don’t just water plants; you water the soil; you create the conditions for growth and life.

To rebuild the house God’s people (in Ezekiel’s vision) we’re going to need good bones and good ground on which to build.

II.
The public witness of the church today sounds like this, “Our bones are dry, our hope is lost.” We hear fear and resentment. The church today has stripped itself of the nutrients in the soil it needs to be nourished. It’s the Spirit who creates vitality in the soils of our sanctuaries; and yet we lack the Spirit’s fruits. The church has forgotten the bones that give us shape. When we lose the connection of justice and righteousness, of prayer and patience, of courage and love, then we no longer feel the cool breath of the Spirit in the valley. Sometimes we don’t want to look at the valley— we don’t want to look at the aftermath of another
school shooting. We don’t want to face the ignorant words of a seminary president advising women to stay in abusive marriages. We don’t think we have the power to change anything. Yet, even the driest bones can still be made to live again. The Spirit can do this. And because the Spirit can, so can you.

Notice— this vision of resurrection — the dry bones— doesn’t happen on the mountain top. The mountain top is the traditional place of revelation in the bible. Abraham takes Isaac to Mount Moriah. Moses goes up to the mountain top to receive the covenant. Elijah goes to the mountain to hear that still, small voice. Jesus takes his disciples to the mount of Transfiguration; his best known sermon is not from a pulpit but a mount. Mountains are holy places — places where in the ancient mind (in their vision of cosmology) they were closer to heaven. Mountains were a thin place. Mountains are a place of strength and strategic advantage. But, valleys? That’s where people live. That’s where we are vulnerable. It’s no accident that the Spirit shows up in the valley. No, this is a message to us about the nature of resurrection, about the nature of the Spirit of God gifted to us on Pentecost. God is not content to stay up on the mountain. God is not content with the so called holy places. No, God is busting out the church doors and bringing life now. Coming to us where we are.

III.
There are some people who we assume are beyond hope. Their bones are too dry. They will never change. Right? That’s what Greg Boyle thought about Johnny. Greg runs the gang recovery and prevention group Homeboy Ministries in LA. Greg had known Johnny since he was fifteen. Johnny was way tougher than someone his age ought to be. He never wanted help from Greg. As a gang member he had spent time in juvenile hall, probation camp, youth authority and finally prison.

Johnny found himself tending to his mother in the last stages of her fight against pancreatic cancer. He cared for her in her final months; he was the hospice point person. When she died Greg did the funeral, and the next week Johnny walked into Homeboy ministries ready to change his life. Four months into his internship there he got on a train home from work. The
The train was packed but he managed to get a seat. Standing right in front of him hanging on to the pole was a gang member covered in tattoos and wreaking of alcohol.

Jonny was wearing his homebody ministries t-shirt with, “Jobs not Jail” emblazoned across the front. The guy said, “You work there?” Johnny didn’t really want to engage this guy so he just nodded. The guy fired back, “It any good?” Johnny shrugged and he said, “Well, it’s helped me. I don’t think I’ll ever go back to prison because of this place.” Then Johnny stood up feeling like the prophet Ezekiel did when he wrote that the “Spirit sat me upon my feet”. He grabbed a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote down the address for Homeboy Ministries. He handed it to the man and said, “Come see us. We’ll help you.”

The train stopped and the man quietly said, “Thank you,” as he got off. Johnny sat down again. What happened next had never happened to him before. He looked around that train and noticed everyone looking at him. He said, “Everyone was noddin’ at me. Everyone on the train was smiling at me… And for the first time in my life… I felt admired.”

As the train rattled on down the track, bone connected to bone. A new life was coming together. The Spirit was breathing on dry bones. It only takes good bones and good ground to rebuild a house. The great scandal of the Spirit is sacred things become common. We forget how charged all of this is. We forget the power of the Spirit is in us. We aren’t just a relic of what used to be. We aren’t just growing sod. You are creating a community of faith in which disciples are shaped— young and old, male and female, hopeful and hopeless. You have the power to call people to new life; to love them into knowing themselves as the beloved of God. New life starts here… on this ground with these bones… there’s a new body.