In the delightful book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis introduces us to four children who find their way into a wondrous land through the back of a wardrobe closet in their uncle's house—which is more like a palace to them. The children, two boys and two girls, stumble upon this magical land called Narnia, with its rolling hills, towering mountains, and rich, deep forests populated by the most remarkable beasts—all of whom can speak. However, they find the land covered with snow, cursed by perpetual winter.

We quickly learned that wicked queen, empowered with extraordinary gifts, has usurped the throne in Narnia. She holds Narnia under her spell, the creatures having to endure bitter cold and ice in a land that was lush and green and warm.

Lewis finally introduces the protagonist, a lion, a mysterious, wondrous beast who comes from beyond Narnia and from beyond time. He's spoken of in hushed tones and reverent terms. In fact, when one of the girls asked a beaver, "Is this lion safe?" the beaver responded, "Safe? Oh my, no. But he's good."

Aslan, as he is called, is Lewis’ Christ-figure: laying down his life for Narnia, dying on a stone table, and then rising from the dead more glorious and majestic than ever. In his risen state he proceeds to reverse the effects of the icy curse upon Narnia. Wherever he goes, wherever he leads his troops, there is dramatic transformation. You need not see him physically to know he is near. You know he is near because the trees begin to thaw and the crocuses bud and bloom, and the flowers begin to break through the surface of the snow.

Toward the end of the story, Aslan leads a troop of liberators into the castle of the wicked queen and finds the courtyard strewn with stone statues: good creatures that had been turned to stone by the witch’s curse. One wonders, as Aslan strides into this castle, how he is going to free those who have been turned to stone. It doesn’t take long before the great beast strides to the first of these statues, lowers his regal head near it, and breathes upon it.

As the breath of the lion touches the stone, the stone ripples into flesh. As his breath fills the lungs of those who were once stone, they awaken and begin to sing and dance and shout the glories of the one who freed them: Aslan, the great and mighty one.

This is C. S. Lewis's way of explaining and illustrating the moment of redemption, that is, the moment when God turns human hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, and brings us out of death to life. It recalls a prophecy that was given to the prophet Ezekiel—one of the most powerful scenes in all of Scripture.

The year is 597 BC.
God’s people, the Israelites have been defeated; they have been taken from their home in Jerusalem and are in exile in Babylon. It’s hard to overstate the weightiness of this moment in the history of Israel. Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, took 20,000 of the Israelites as his captives and drove them out of their homes and out of the city.

He left behind only the poorest members of the community, those who would never be able to amass the resources to challenge him. A month later he burned the city to the ground, including Solomon’s palace and the Temple of the Lord.

All of the gold and silver inside was plundered, and the Ark of the Covenant disappeared forever. The priests were brought before Nebuchadnezzar so that he could watch as they were put to death. The assumption was that this was not just the destruction of a city; it was the end of a nation.

And as they went into exile the Israelites wrote poetry about the city they had been forced to abandon. The prophet Ezekiel, living in exile, remembering in his mind’s eye the Jerusalem I just described, has this vision: the hand of God sets Ezekiel down in the middle of a dry valley. The valley is full of bones.

God leads Ezekiel all throughout the valley, walking among the bones, picking up a skull here and there as if to ask who this might have been. What family did she have, what children left behind, and what were his stories—what songs did he sing and what jokes did he tell—when muscle and sinew surrounded those bones, and blood, breath, and spirit flowed through the bodies?

Could they live again, Ezekiel wonders. And in the vision the Lord asks him as much: “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Is this a rhetorical question? I can’t help but wonder what went through Ezekiel’s mind at that moment. He had to have been utterly devastated, staring at destruction, death, dust.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” And the Lord’s answer comes: yes, yes they can, and you, Ezekiel, will lead them—you will call them into being once more. So Ezekiel speaks. He prophesies to the bones, “and suddenly there is a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

There are sinews on them and flesh, the bodies come together,” but at first no breath is in the bodies, so Ezekiel speaks again, and breath comes into the bodies, and they stand and walk.
And the Lord says to Ezekiel, “These bones are the whole house of Israel,” these are the lost souls that were once dragged out of the city of Jerusalem, away from their home.

“And you will know that I am the Lord,” says God to Ezekiel, “because just as I have lifted these bones from their graves, so I will restore Jerusalem. I will bring my people home.” The breath of life, breathed upon that dark place, breathed into those dead bodies.

There is no drama on television, in the movies, in video games or in life that can compare to those moments immediately following the birth of a baby. This tiny body that has just made a miraculous journey—is in the hands of the doctor who delivered. This life that has been sustained by the mom with oxygen and nutrition for nine months takes its first breath and cries out in it’s perfect way “I’m alive!”

There’s a change in the atmosphere of the room. Laughter, weeping, sighs of relief. This is a miracle, and there is no match for the feeling of sheer joy and delight that permeates the room.

Just thinking about that cherished, and yet so very personal, experience takes me back to Genesis 2:

> When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

Our Scripture this morning is one of the most intimate passages in the Bible. God reaches down to form a human being from the dust of the earth and breathes “into his nostrils the breath of life” so that he becomes “a living creature.”

This is not simply face-to-face resuscitation: it is the formation of a human being – body and spirit – as one. We see, yet again, the proclamation of God’s life-giving rule over the entire creation right from the beginning.

When our Jewish ancestors talked about God and God’s power to act—to create and shape and move, they used the Hebrew word *ruah* which means “wind, breath.” In fact, if you go back to the very beginning, in Genesis 1:1–2, we find the Spirit of God—*ruah*—“hovering over the face of the waters.” The breath of God was the animating element in the earth’s creation! It is this holy breath that gave life to the bones in Ezekiel’s vision.
It is this same breath that Jesus speaks forth to his disciples—terrified and huddled in a room wondering what to do now that their Lord was dead. The room was closed and the windows were shut.

And the resurrected Jesus appears in their midst. He probably scared them half to death, because his first words are "Peace. Calm down. It's me." Then he says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you," and the narrative concludes: "And with that Jesus breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

And it is this same breath of God that breathes upon the Church—the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is the same breath that is given to us each and every day through the power of the Spirit.

I remember the day my five-year-old child asked me what made the wind. This was during a powerful late-afternoon windstorm when tree limbs banged against our roof and leaves and twigs swirled around just outside the window.

Explanations of high and low pressure were attempted but didn’t go over very well, of course, so we started to talk about how you couldn’t see the wind, but you could see it move the trees (this was as we watched our trees outside as they were pummeled alarmingly by the storm).

And this made me think of Christina Rossetti’s nursery rhyme, “Who has seen the wind?”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Who has seen the wind?} & \\
\text{Neither I nor you:} & \\
\text{But when the leaves hang trembling} & \\
\text{The wind is passing thro’.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Who has seen the wind?} & \\
\text{Neither you nor I:} & \\
\text{But when the trees bow down their heads} & \\
\text{The wind is passing by.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

How do you explain to a five-year-old that, while you cannot see the wind, you can see and feel its effects? Probably the same way you would explain to a child that you cannot see God, but you can see and feel His effects.

The wind from God that sweeps over the face of the waters at the beginning of creation. The breath that God breathes into the nostrils of the first being made from the dust of the earth. The Holy Spirit that was poured upon the fledgling church after Jesus’ ascension.

What are the “dry bones” in your own life? What are the things that seem hopeless, that seem beyond resuscitation? Troubles in our homes and relationships, disagreements with our spouses, hassles with our children, discord with parents. Is it possible to make things good again when so much of the love that once was has gone away? What about the problems in our local community, in cities across the country, and within countries across the globe? Gun violence, troubled schools, hunger and poverty, genocide and war—is there anything that can be done? Is there any hope that stone hearts might become hearts of flesh?

It often feels like we walk through our days, as Ezekiel walked through that valley, and we are presented the same question: can these bones live?

Can these bones live? Yes.
For God’s Spirit is on the move, like Aslan, thawing the icy curse, breathing new life into hearts of stone. May we open our eyes and our hearts to see, hear, feel the breath of life, the wind of the Holy Spirit, blowing freely within and among us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.