

“Unbroken”

Ezekiel 37: 1-14, John 11: 1-45

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I am struck by the very stark images we hear in these stories. Both confront us with the jarring realities of death. There is nothing subtle about them. Ezekiel walks through a valley of dried up bones. He is forced to maneuver through the skeletal remains of his people, his brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends. As he surveys the landscape, he can envision only death, there seems to be no signs of hope here. Oddly enough, God asks Ezekiel if these bones can live. Chuckling, Ezekiel answers, “O Lord, God, you know.” One can only imagine that if it were up to Ezekiel, or any of us for that matter, the answer would be no way. He is standing in a valley full of dried up bones, how can life emerge from such desolation? Only God knows if such a ludicrous thing is possible. God alone possesses the power to breathe life back into that which was once dead. God brings Ezekiel to this place to teach him that new life is possible when we trust in God’s power to work through us, as vessels of healing, hope and reconciliation.

According to God, all it takes is a willingness to follow God’s lead and miracles will happen. It is as simple as telling the bones to come back together; leg bone finding knee bone, elbow bone finding wrist bone, hip bone finding back bone. Set about putting your dried up life back together and then God will fill you up with the breath of life. Before you know it you will be good as new. Everything will be back to normal. Ah, how I wish it were that simple in real life.

Both stories give us a preview to the resurrection story yet to come. Ezekiel’s resurrection of the dry bones is much more dramatic than what we hear about Lazarus. These folks have been dead much longer than 4 days. They have been long dead and the community has been grieving this loss, slipping in fact from grief to despair. They see death and loneliness and uncertainty and hopelessness all around them and wonder how life can ever emerge out of this. Ezekiel must have thought God was crazy telling him to simply speak and all would be made well again.

Those of us who have walked through that dark place know what that is like. God keeps speaking, making new life possible. We can not always hear God when the grief is fresh, when we are still coming to grips with the impact and finality of our loss. That is where we find Mary and Martha, the beloved sisters of Lazarus. They send word to Jesus that their brother is ill and anticipate Jesus rushing to be with them. Jesus is not only a teacher and preacher, he is their friend. They are part of the inner circle of disciples. Surely Jesus will be there as soon as he receives word. They do not tell him, however, how serious the situation is. They do not tell him that Lazarus has run out of hope; that he is near death. Without saying a word, Jesus knows what is happening.

Much to the sister’s dismay, Jesus does not rush to be by Lazarus’ bedside. In fact, he waits two days before answering this pastoral call. Some translations use the word “tarries.” This word implies that Jesus had better things to do than answer their plea for

help so he hung around, waiting until he was ready to respond. His work elsewhere was more important than rushing to a dead man's home. Jesus wasn't just held up, he intentionally waited, delayed, dragged his feet, tarried. After all, Lazarus wasn't going to be any less dead in a few days. Some people believe Jesus waits to insure that by the time he arrives there could be no misunderstanding that Lazarus was really dead. In the Jewish tradition, the soul leaves the body after four days and there is no longer any possibility of resuscitation. Therefore, there is a compassionate purpose in this tarrying. I wonder, has there been a moment in your life when you have cried out to God and you felt as though God was tarrying? Who has not cried out in times of grief: "God, where are you?" "God, couldn't you have done something to prevent this?" "God why did this happen?" Whatever purpose Jesus may have in not coming sooner, we hear the pain of this decision in Mary and Martha's half-lament, half-accusation, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

The disciples try to persuade Jesus to not go to Lazarus' house. They believe Bethany is a dangerous place, that people are waiting there to stone him. There are no easy days or easy answers at this point in Jesus' ministry. He is nearing the end. He is aware of the risks and nevertheless, he eventually responds to Mary and Martha's request to come. The disciples reluctantly follow, willing to place themselves in danger to continue on the way with Jesus.

When Jesus arrives he is confronted by Mary and Martha's grief and anger. Martha rushes out to meet Jesus and after giving him a thorough tongue lashing for not coming sooner, she enters into a full blown theological discussion with Jesus. He tries to reassure her that Lazarus will come back to life. Martha, however misunderstands Jesus. She thinks he is talking about the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Jesus is talking about the here and now. He will bring Lazarus back to life in this moment. Jesus proclaims I am the resurrection and the life. I bring life out of death so there can be new life again. He asks Martha if she believes and she assures him that she believes Jesus is the Messiah. She makes this astounding profession of faith long before Peter does, however, it is buried in the midst of this healing and resurrection story. I am here to let you know, Martha was first with this astounding profession of faith!

Martha returns to the house and sends Mary out to see Jesus. Mary too is overcome with grief. She has the presence of mind however, to reprimand Jesus insisting that her brother would still be alive if he had not delayed. She can then saying no more and begins to weep. We have a glimpse into a very tender, intimate moment between Mary and Jesus. While Jesus may have a purpose for his delay, he is overcome by the very real pain this has caused his friends. He is sorry that he has had to put them through this and weeps with Mary. We see here a poignant reminder of Jesus' humanity. Jesus weeps for both their grief and their diminished hope. While Jesus is portrayed as such a powerful being in John's gospel, he is not unmoved by our plight. Jesus, the word made flesh, has come to share our common lot and life, fully and completely. I wonder, what does it mean to you that God weeps with us and for us?

Although Jesus appears to have been insensitive to Mary and Martha's needs, he does not let the mourners become stuck in their despair. He takes them to the tomb where Lazarus has been laid and instructs them to remove the stone. No one volunteers knowing that after four days it can not be pleasant. Jesus reminds them that all will be well if they only believe. They faithfully remove the stone. When the stone is removed, Jesus commands Lazarus to come out. It is not unlike God commanding Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones. Any reasonable person would doubt that a simple command could bring together dried bones or bring life back to a brother and friend who has died. Has God ever spoken to you with that kind of authority? Have you ever had an experience where you knew God was telling you exactly what you needed to do, no matter how ridiculous it may have sounded at the time? It can be a frightening experience, yet when we respond faithfully, God assures us that all will be well when we trust and believe.

Finally, Jesus instructs the people to unbind Lazarus. In participating in this resurrection drama we become partners, even co-creators with Jesus. One preacher says, "Creation and redemption are God's work, activity, responsibility, yet we also are given a role to play. In responding to God's call to participate in the ongoing work of God to renew and restore the world, we are drawn into God's redemptive work and in this way made God's partners, even co-creators. Do we see ourselves this way? What would it be like to imagine that through our work, our roles and our relationships, God is still commanding us to unbind, set free, release, and renew?"

We learn some important lessons about God through these little miracle stories. God works through tragedies in our lives though that can be difficult to see at the time. God identifies with us and feels our hopes and hurts as God's own. God acts to redeem and save God's people in mercy and love. And finally, in the end, God invites us into God's activity and grants us lives of meaning and purpose. Julian of Norwich, the great 14th century mystic pronounced, "And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well in the end." Ezekiel, Mary and Martha learned these painful yet life affirming lessons in and through their tragedies. In partnership with and faithfulness to our loving God, may we come to know it as well? Indeed when we trust in God and seek to be faithful, all shall be well. May it be so. Amen