

Welcome

I'm a Southern transplant, which doesn't usually present too many problems. But one time in college, I was headed to the city of Blytheville, AR for a weekend retreat. Now, this was before the days of GPS, so all I had was my trusty road atlas. I was driving through the southern part of Missouri - no Interstates, no road signs, nothing.

Finally, I turned south and headed toward Arkansa. I thought that surely I must be getting close to Blytheville. On the Atlas, it was just across the state line! But... it kept just not showing up. I started to get nervous. Remember - I didn't have a display to tell me how much further I had to go.

So I pulled off at a gas station to ask if I was still on the right track. "Hi, I'm supposed to be going to Blytheville. Am I getting close?"

The attendant squinted at me. "Blytheville? Never heard of it."

I started panicking. I thought I was supposed to be within 20 miles or so. And this guy had never *heard* of it? Was I in Oklahoma or something? "Uh... oh no. I thought I was getting close."

He squinted at me again and grinned. "Bluvul is just up the road about 15 minutes."

I blinked. "Bluvul?"

He nodded once. "Yup."

"Uh, thanks!"

I left laughing to myself - I'd never have guessed the locals pronounced *Blytheville* as 'Bluvul', and I was grateful for an attendant who, after a little good-natured teasing, clued a Yankee boy in.

But honestly, I would have killed for a sign.

When we're feeling lost, we wish we could wave a magic wand and just appear at our destination. The next best thing is a sign that points us to where we're going. Signs, in that way, are a concrete embodiment of hope.

We're going to explore hoe today, and how Jesus points us to our true home.

Message

We're in the season of Lent, which is a six-week journey we take with Jesus to the Cross. It's a season we set aside each year for introspection, a time to ask ourselves if we're living in faith, both as individuals and as a church family.

Our series this year is called Broken Promises. Each week, we've been exploring one of the covenants God made with the people in the Hebrew Bible. We've see how - and why - the people failed to keep those covenants. Today, we're flipping the script. Because we live in a world where God doesn't always keep God's promises.

I'll say that again, in case you're hoping I misspoke: we live in a world where God doesn't always keep God's promises.

I know... you're bracing for the lightning bolt. We're not allowed to say that in Church, are we?

This is where I'm supposed to rush in with religious platitudes like "it's all part of God's plan!" or "everything happens for a reason" or "God just needed another flower in his garden!"

But honestly... those platitudes are awful. So instead, I'd rather look at how God answers our experiences of God's failure.

And here's the thing - what we're going to find isn't explanations. It's something better: hope.

Turn with us to [Ezekiel 37](#).

Ezekiel is a prophet who lived through the cultural apocalypse we call the Exile -- what God's people experienced as God not being there. After all, they are supposed to be God's people. God made a covenant with David that David would *always* have a descendant on the throne of Judah, and now that descendant had been conquered, blinded and dragged away in chains, made a laughing stock.

And the people had been destroyed.

So... how could Ezekiel say God is faithful? Enter this absolutely bonkers vision Ezekiel has, one that feels like it was produced by Tim Burton. Let's read together:

The Lord took hold of me, and I was carried away by the Spirit of the Lord to a valley filled with bones. He led me all around among the bones that covered the valley floor. They were scattered everywhere across the ground and were completely dried out. Then he asked me, "Son of man, can these bones become living people again?"

"O Sovereign Lord," I replied, "you alone know the answer to that." -- Ezekiel 37:1-3 (NLT)

Ezekiel comes to a valley filled with human bones. Friends this is literally a scene from a horror movie. And for Ezekiel and his audience, it has a compounded meaning: these bones would conjure for them visions of their recent defeat and humiliation by Babylon. These are all those lost in battle, to hunger, disease and war.

These are the victims of God's abandonment.

And God asks the prophet: Can they live again?

The right answer, of course, is "No."

But God's not in the habit of asking such obvious questions. So... what's happening here? Ezekiel can't bring himself to hope, so he simply says, "God, you know better than I do."

It's not quite a declaration of faith, but it opens the *possibility* of faith. And God doesn't need more than an opening to do what comes next:

Then he said to me, "Speak a prophetic message to these bones and say, 'Dry bones, listen to the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again! I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.' "

So I spoke this message, just as he told me. Suddenly as I spoke, there was a rattling noise all across the valley. The bones of each body came together and attached themselves as complete skeletons. Then as I watched, muscles and flesh formed over the bones. Then skin formed to cover their bodies, but they still had no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Speak a prophetic message to the winds, son of man. Speak a prophetic message and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again.' "

So I spoke the message as he commanded me, and breath came into their bodies. They all came to life and stood up on their feet—a great army.

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones represent the people of Israel. They are saying, 'We have become old, dry bones—all hope is gone. Our nation is finished.' Therefore, prophesy to them and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O my people, I will open your graves of exile and cause you to rise again. Then I will bring you back to the land of Israel. When this happens, O my people, you will know that I am the Lord. I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live again and return home to your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done what I said. Yes, the Lord has spoken!' " -- Ezekiel 37:4–14 (NLT)

This is resurrection, friends. A vision of God restoring the people, an act of creation that mirrors the creation story in [Genesis 2](#), with God breathing the wind/breath/spirit of life into dry earth.

This is what Ezekiel offers a devastated people: this end is not THE END. God is still at work, God is still fulfilling the promises God made to the people.

And not even *death* can stop God from being faithful. If God must raise us from the dead in order to fulfill the promises God made to us, then God will recreate us.

Song

This God who is faithful to the point of resurrection is who we meet in Jesus.

Turn with us to [John 11](#).

This is the story of the raising of Lazarus, and because it's so familiar to us, I don't want us to rush into the story.

Unlike the other Gospels, in John, Jesus only does seven miracles. And rather than calling them 'miracles', John calls them 'signs'. They point to deep truths about who Jesus is and what he's about. (John points out at the end of his gospel that Jesus did way more than seven signs... he chose these seven on purpose).

Raising Lazarus from the dead is sign number seven. It's the last sign, which means it's also the ultimate sign - and yeah, raising the dead? Pretty amazing.

But all of this is to say: John understood what Jesus was doing here not as something he just went around doing all the time; rather, it was a one-time event that was meant to illustrate a powerful truth.

Jesus was good friends with Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. They lived in a suburb of Jerusalem, and it seems that Jesus stayed with them anytime he visited the capitol. They weren't just followers; they were *friends*.

So keep that in mind as we read what's unfolding:

A man named Lazarus was sick. He lived in Bethany with his sisters, Mary and Martha. This is the Mary who later poured the expensive perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair. Her brother, Lazarus, was sick. So the two sisters sent a message to Jesus telling him, "Lord, your dear friend is very sick."

But when Jesus heard about it he said, "Lazarus's sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this." So although

Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, he stayed where he was for the next two days. Finally, he said to his disciples, “Let’s go back to Judea.”

Jesus didn’t heal Lazarus. Wouldn’t you think that being bffs with a guy who built his reputation on miraculous healings would carry at least the perk of not having to worry about getting sick? Especially not getting a fatal illness.

But Lazarus gets sick. And despite the fact that Jesus can heal from a distance, he doesn’t. In fact, he doesn’t even show up. He *waits* until Lazarus is good and dead until he even starts his trip.

You’ve prayed for healing? So have I. So did Jesus’ besties. We all know what it’s like to be met with silence.

So when word comes that Jesus is finally showing up, Lazarus’ sister goes out to meet him. What would you say to Jesus? Let’s listen to Martha:

When Jesus arrived at Bethany, he was told that Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days. Bethany was only a few miles down the road from Jerusalem, and many of the people had come to console Martha and Mary in their loss. When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus told her, “Your brother will rise again.”

“Yes,” Martha said, “he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day.”

Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?”

“Yes, Lord,” she told him. “I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God.” -- John 11:17–27 (NLT)

I find Martha’s words here so fascinating. You can hear how belief in the resurrection has become part of Jewish religious belief - she has that understanding that one day, she’ll see her brother again.

But... doesn’t being besties with Jesus mean you get to avoid all this? Doesn’t being faithful to God mean we get a pass on life’s hardships?

In short, no. Because the story we see in Jesus is not a God who removes himself from the pain of the world. Quite the opposite: when the world is drowning in sin and death, God becomes human and enters into that with us.

It's why Jesus weeps at Lazarus' grave before he raises Lazarus to life.

Lazarus' resurrection is a sneak preview for us. It's Jesus demonstrating that same message Ezekiel received - the worst thing is never the last thing.

In the end, all will be well. So if it's not well, then it's not the end. God is still at work.

Which is not a statement intended to shut down grief, confusion, doubt or anger. Jesus didn't scold Mary or Martha - he reassured them. He grieved with them. And he was present to them.

So too, Jesus invites us to bring all our doubts, anger and grief into our worship. Into our private prayer.

We can say, "Lord, if you had been here..."

In fact, it's precisely in those moments of deepest pain and doubt we meet Jesus.

Communion + Examen

Jesus goes ahead of us. We follow him by faith.

Where have I sensed God's presence in the last week?

What difficult circumstances have kept me from God in recent weeks?

What questions or emotions might keep me from God in this next week?

How can I engage honestly with God this week?

Assignment + Blessing