

"From Metaphor to Reality"  
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church  
Reverend Henry T.C. Sun, Ph.D.  
26 March 2023  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
John 11:33-45

Ezekiel 37

<sup>1</sup>The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup>He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." <sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." <sup>7</sup>So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup>I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. <sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. <sup>11</sup>Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'

<sup>12</sup>Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup>I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,” says the LORD.

## John 11

<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” <sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

<sup>45</sup>Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

## I. Introduction

As a high school math teacher, there is really no greater teaching experience than watching students get an "Aha!" moment in class, a moment in which everything kind of clicks together and everything I've tried to teach them over the last few class sessions all falls into place like one neat and tidy jigsaw puzzle.

That happened to one of my students earlier this week. We were looking at the graphs of quadratic equations which might look like this (**slide2**). You will notice that if you follow the left hand side of the graph, it eventually hits the ***vertex point*** (0, -4), which is the point where the graph turns and travels in the opposite direction. You will also notice that if you draw a straight vertical line through that vertex point, the left hand side and the right hand side of the graph are identical. We call that line the ***axis of symmetry*** of the quadratic equation, and it will always be true that the vertex point lies on the axis of symmetry. So on Wednesday, as we were reviewing for Thursday's test, one of my students blurted out in class, "So the vertex and the axis of symmetry have the same value! Now I get it!!" That was obviously a big win for the student because now that they could articulate what I'd been teaching them for weeks, I can be hopeful that they won't forget that when they begin to look at more complicated quadratic equations in 11th grade math. That's why an "Aha!" moment is so powerful. Things come together in ways that finally make sense to the individual.

The Revised Common Lectionary does not always pair readings that come together as clearly, cleanly, and obviously as our two readings from Ezekiel and John do. Both deal with

the topic of resurrection, the question of the power of God over death, and the hope that is thereby created in we who are followers of Jesus. So let's how that looks from Ezekiel to John.

## IIA. Pivot to Ezekiel

The prophet Ezekiel, like his contemporary Jeremiah, lived on both sides of the Babylonian exile. Scholars believe that Ezekiel's ministry lasted from about 593 - 571 BCE, so about 7-8 years in Palestine, then the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 586 BCE, and finally about 15 or so years in Babylon (see ABD 2:713; Blenkinsopp, Ezekiel, 4). This straddling of the Babylonian exile explains in large part the broad outline of the book that bears Ezekiel's name. The first part of Ezekiel, chapters 1-24, contain prophecies of warning and judgment against the children of Israel who are still living in the promised land but are in danger of losing their freedom because of their sinful behavior. The final section of Ezekiel, chapters 33-48, contain prophecies of hope and restoration for the children of Israel because the kingdom of David has been conquered and the children of Israel have been exiled to Babylon. Hence the burden on the prophet is to proclaim that their conquest and exile is not the end of their relationship with God.

Our text this morning, then, falls into this section where prophecies of hope and restoration following the exile properly belong. How does Ezekiel proclaim his message of hope to the chosen people living in Babylon?

(slide3) Consider the setting that is given in verses 1-2: “The hand of the Lord came upon me (הַיָּתָה עָלַיִד־יְהוָה); see Zimmerli, Ezekiel 2:259 [“In a way which is unusual for Ezekiel the section 37:1–14\* begins with a simple perfect”]; Hals, Ezekiel 268-69, who cites the similar language in Ezek 1:3; 3:22; 8:1; 33:22; 40:1; Eichrodt, Ezekiel 506; Blenkinsopp, Ezekiel, 170; Greenberg, AB 742), and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup>He led me all around them; there were

very many (רַבּוֹת מְאֹד) lying in the valley, and they were very dry (יְבֵשׁוֹת מְאֹד).” That reference to “bones” (עַצְמוֹת) is not completely transparent to the modern reader. In the ancient world ‘bones’ are completely and thoroughly unclean and they make anyone who touches them completely and thoroughly unclean as well. That would be bad enough, but Ezekiel was also a priest, born into a priestly family, according to Ezek 1:3 (“the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel”). Priests were to be so careful against becoming unclean through contact with death in any form that they were prohibited by the Old Testament law from attending funerals of anyone but his immediate family (Lev 21:1-4) and even in that context had to stay far away from the corpse of the deceased family members (Lev 21:11; see D. T. Olsen, *Lectionary Commentary* 1:460-63). In other words, Ezekiel found himself in the worst possible place any priest could be, because of who he was and what surrounded him.

But these bones carry a second cultural significance that is mostly lost to us moderns. In the ancient world, battlefields were not emptied of corpses when the battle was won and done. Instead, the bodies of the dead warriors were left on the field of battle for scavengers and carrion to devour over time (“When an army was defeated, the victor would often leave most of the corpses unburied, stripping the bodies of any valuables while leaving the flesh for carrion birds and other predators” [Corrine Carvalho, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1820](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1820)], accessed 21 March 2023; see also ZIBBC 4:481). So in addition to being the most defiling and unclean situation that Ezekiel could possibly be in, this valley of dry bones is simultaneously a humiliating reminder of their military loss at the hands of the Babylonians and all that loss entailed. Loss of life and loss of land. Loss of freedom and loss of political and economic autonomy. Loss of temple, loss of faithful worship, and loss of God’s protection against the enemy. In other words, those bones symbolize the *loss of everything that mattered most to the faithful Jewish follower of God*.

(slide4) In this admittedly depressing context, God's first instruction to Ezekiel comes in verses 4-6: "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." And what does Ezekiel do? Exactly what God told him to do: "So I prophesied as I had been commanded" (verse 7a). And what happened when Ezekiel started to prophesy as God told him to prophesy? "suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup>I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them" (vv 7b-8a). That's the good news. Verse 8b gives us the bad news, though: "but there was no breath in them." Why is this bad news? Because without breath, we don't have life. Karl Barth, perhaps the most famous theologian of the 20th century, goes so far as to call this a "commentary" quote unquote on Genesis 2, where we read that "the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7; see Barth, CD V, 391-92).

(slide5) Well, that problem doesn't last for long. In verse 9, God tells Ezekiel to "prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live" and Ezekiel obediently complies in verse 10: "I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." Problem solved, right? That second prophecy addresses the absence of breath in vv 7-8, and in fact the dead bones "lived," or "came to life."

(slide6) But so what, right? What's the point of this little drama? In order to make sure that the intention is crystal clear, God tells us what it means in verses 11-14, because in these verses, God draws an explicit connection between the bones and the children of Israel, between that valley full of dry bones and the intensely real sense of desperate defeated despair that the children of Israel are feeling in Babylon. These dry bones are a metaphor for the followers of God, people who are struggling with all the loss that the Babylonian exile brought. To the people struggling with loss, God says, "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people." God's ability to bring these dry bones back to life is a metaphor of God's ability to bring the exiled children of Israel back to life. It might not happen today or tomorrow or next week, but God promised that it would happen, and indeed it finally did happen when the children of Israel exited the Babylonian exile in 536 BCE and returned, safe and sound, back to the Promised Land.

## IIB. Pivot to John

(slide7) Fast forward about 600 years, and we will see how the metaphor from Ezekiel 37 becomes a reality in John 11. Verse 1 tells us that a certain man named Lazarus, who lived in a town called Bethany, falls ill. Jesus hears about this in verse 3, and makes the curious decision to stay where he is for two extra days in verse 6 (commentators do not agree what the motivation is for this delay; see, e.g., Haenchen Hermeneia 57 ["his delay would turn a simple illness into an unheard of miracle, a resurrection from the dead, a miracle that would make faith easier in the view of the narrator"]; Bernard old ICC 2:375 ["Jn. consistently represents Jesus as never being in haste. He always knew when the time to move had come"]; Ramsey NICNT 617 ["Why the delay, if Jesus 'loved' them? Part of the answer, as we have just seen, is surely his determination not to have his hand forced by the wishes of others (besides 2:4, see also 7:6-9). Moreover, anyone who knows the end of the story might well suspect that he waited until Lazarus had died so as finally to

raise him from the dead instead of merely healing him"]; Barrett John 391 ["A more probable view is (d) that John wished to underline the fact that Jesus' movement towards Jerusalem, and so to his death, was entirely self-determined; no mere human affection led him into a trap he did not suspect"]).

I have to admit to you that whenever I read this passage my initial emotional response is, "How dare Jesus do that!" I would have expected him to drop everything that he was doing in order to get to Lazarus as quickly as he could. Instead, he tarries two more days for some unknown and unstated reason before he begins the journey to Bethany. Those two days end, and Jesus tells his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea again" in verse 7. And after a little back-and-forth conversation between and among the disciples, they head over to Lazarus. (slide8) Interestingly, Jesus tells the disciples in verse 14 that "Lazarus is dead." How does Jesus know that? We don't know and John doesn't tell us. And so, unsurprisingly, when Jesus and the disciples find themselves in Bethany, they learn that Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days (verse 17). Naturally, people are heartbroken and in mourning, especially his two sisters Mary and Martha, both of whom comment to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died"; Martha says it in verse 21 and Mary says exactly the same thing in verse 32. When Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus "will rise again," she misunderstands that to be a reference to the resurrection at the end of time, but that isn't Jesus' point. Jesus is telling Martha that Lazarus will rise again *in a few moments' time*, not at the end of time.

(slide9) All this sets the stage for the miracle of Lazarus' literal resurrection. In verse 39, Jesus instructs those who are present to "Take away the stone." In verse 41, the stone is taken away, Jesus prays to God, and in verse 43 says to dead man Lazarus, "Lazarus, come out!" And so he does. "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth" (verse 44). And after taking off all that cloth and all those wrapping,



Lazarus lives again, and "many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him" (verse 45).

### III. Pivot to Today

I mentioned at the beginning of this morning's sermon that the lectionary readings for any given Sunday don't generally dovetail as nicely, cleanly, and unambiguously as these two texts do. Both of these texts speak unambiguously of the resurrection of people who were dead, even though Ezekiel 37 speaks of resurrection in a metaphorical way (as does, e.g., Jonah 2, which speaks of Sheol [verse 2] and The Pit [verse 6] metaphorically) while John 11 speaks of it in a literal way (as does, e.g., 1 Kings 17:17-24 [Elijah brings the dead son of the widow of Zarephath of Sidon back to life] ; 2 Kings 4:32-37 [Elijah brings the Shunamite widow's dead son back to life]; and 2 Kings 13:21 [a dead man is thrown onto the bones of Elisha and comes back to life]).

And so both of our passages this morning ask us the following kinds of questions: If we use the language Ezekiel used, we ask ourselves, Where are the dry bones in our life? Which of our graves need to be opened, so that we can be brought up and brought back - not to a literal Promised Land, but to the place where God wants us to be? And if we use the language of the gospel of John, we might ask, Where are we trapped in a tomb from which we need to be rescued and set back on our feet again?

Has your walk with Jesus become a deadly dull routine? Has a relationship gone bad, seemingly irredeemably bad? Do you feel like you are trapped by your circumstances and are just going through the motions in your day-to-day routine, doing what you do because someone has to do it and no one else will? Do you wonder whether God still has plans for your life because you can't see how you are making a difference in this divided, toxic, polarized world we live in? Our world values the young, not the old; the rich and the powerful, not the poor and

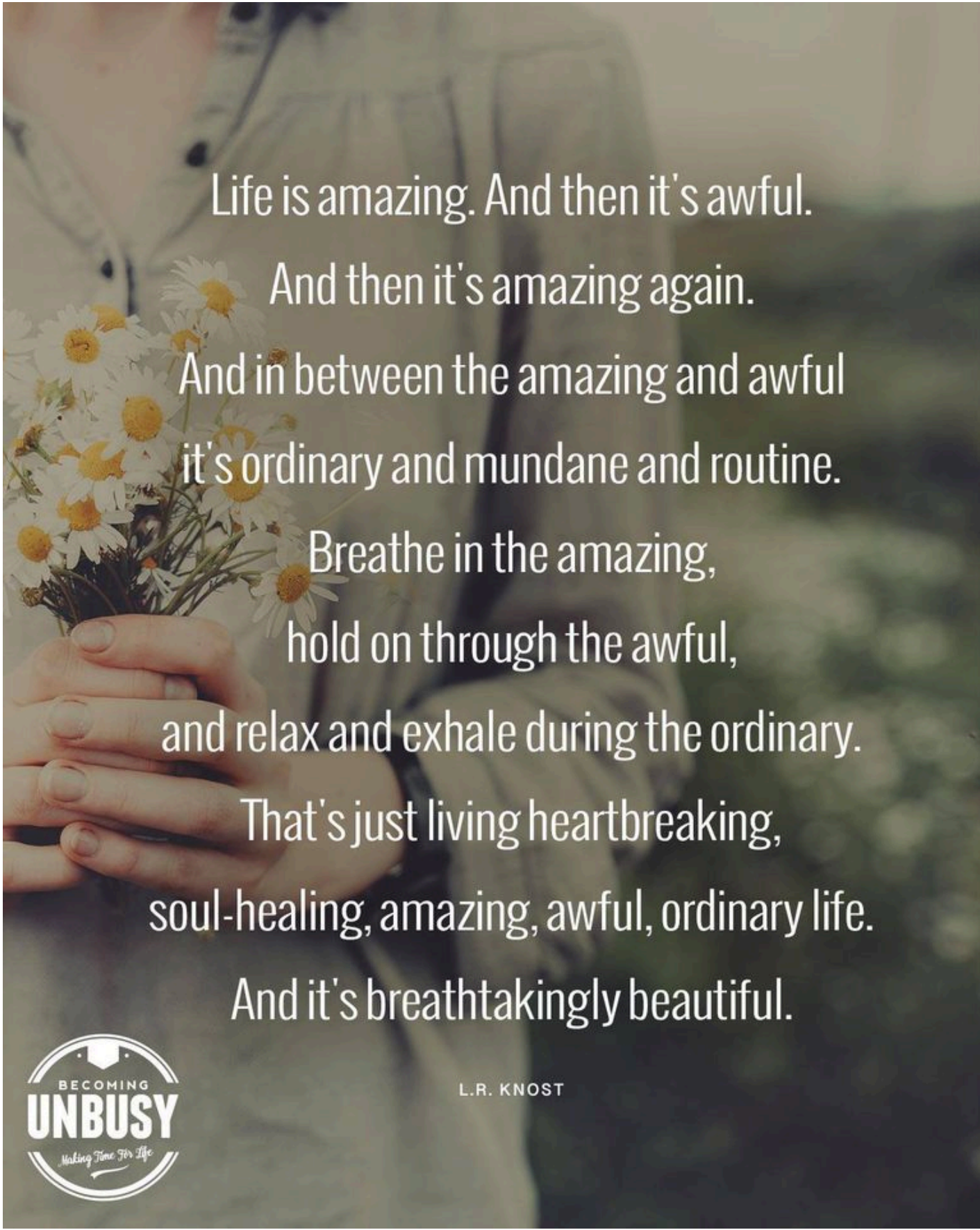
the powerless; the famous, not the obscure, and if get caught up in the world's values, it is easy to feel like and believe that we are all worthless, good for nothing corpses on a battlefield.

But the God we serve cares not one whit about age or wealth or power of celebrity. God cares about us as God's beloved children. So what might happen if God breathed new life into our old dead bones? What might happen if something you thought was dead in a tomb could be resurrected? What new sparks of joy could you experience, and how might you serve God and God's kingdom no matter what your circumstances might be?

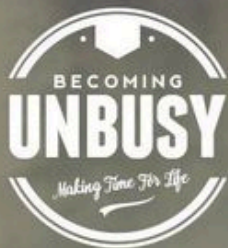
We all need the revitalizing power of God in our lives. One of my former students from Kentucky posted this on Facebook on Saturday, and it is a great reminder that "Life is amazing. And then it's awful. And then it's amazing again. And in between the amazing and awful it's ordinary and mundane and routine. Breathe in the amazing, hold on through the awful, and relax and exhale during the ordinary. That's just living heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful, ordinary life. And it's breathtakingly beautiful." And that's all true. But let's not forget that it is God who sustains us during the awful parts of life, it is God who can change the awful parts of life back into the amazing parts of life, and it is when life is ordinary and mundane and routine that we often get to know God better and more deeply in our walks of faith.

When all is said and done, it is God who saved us once and it is God who can save us again and can bring our dead bones back to life - whatever those dead bones might be, and no matter what tomb we think we are stuck in. It is the God who created us and who saved us who will empower us to be ambassadors and evangelists for the kingdom of God wherever we might be and whatever our circumstances are, so that through our obedience to God and through God's Spirit working within us many will believe in Jesus. And so may the hope that we will formally

celebrate two weeks from today be the hope that inspires you never to give up on God and on God's power to open up our graves, to rescue us from our tombs, and live in such a way that many will believe in Jesus. Amen.

A person wearing a light-colored button-down shirt is holding a bouquet of white daisies with yellow centers. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with greenery.

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