

I AM the Resurrection and the Life

7/7 I AM Series

John 11: 17-27

04 04 2010 (Easter Sunday) Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Introduction

Jesus was a dead man walking. The religious leaders' hatred had grown into a murderous fury. During his previous visit to Jerusalem, the Lord had narrowly escaped with his life. Jesus and the disciples had fled to safety on the far side of the Jordan River.

Then word came that **Lazarus** was deathly ill. Jesus enjoyed a close friendship with Lazarus and his two sisters, **Mary** and **Martha**. The women obviously hoped that the Lord would return to heal their brother. However, their home in Bethany was only a stone's throw away from Jerusalem's gates.

After a two day delay, Jesus finally said to the disciples: "*Let us go back to Judea.*" His friends protested that such a return would lead to certain death. Yet the Lord promised that they would see God's glory revealed. So the disciples reluctantly followed Jesus back to Bethany.

I. Jesus and Martha

They arrived to discover that Lazarus had been dead and buried four days. A large group of mourners had gathered at family's home. **Martha** came outside to meet Jesus and greeted him with the grief-stricken words: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*"

Martha's words were a curious blend of faith and doubt, confidence and complaint, praise and reproach. *IF* Jesus had arrived in time, then she believed that the miraculous would have occurred; *BUT* the Lord was too late. Then Martha added: "*But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.*" She could not imagine what the Lord might do, but faith still allowed her to hope-against-hope.

Jesus responded: "*Your brother will rise again.*" Following a death, people often say things like: "He's better off. She's not suffering any more. They're in heaven. The Lord will take care of you." All of these statements are true enough, but they don't take away the pain of loss.

Martha seemed to impatiently brush aside Jesus' words by responding: "*I KNOW he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*"

Then Jesus spoke words that continue to echo in our ears this Easter morning: "***I AM the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?***"

Christ's question cut through Martha's sorrow as she slowly, faithfully answered: "*Yes, Lord, I believe*"

II. Jesus and Mary

Martha rushed back home and told her sister: "*The Teacher is here and is asking for you.*" So Mary went out to meet him. Mary's greeting echoed her sister's words of faith and reproach: "*Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*"

His friends' grief and tears caused Jesus to be "*deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*" However, these words do not adequately express the depth of Christ's emotions. The Lord was stirred to great anger and indignation. Then the shortest verse of the Bible simply states: "***Jesus wept.***"

- 1) Perhaps the Lord was deeply moved by Martha and Mary's grief.
- 2) Maybe Christ was angered by his followers' disbelief. He had revealed God's kingdom breaking in all about them, but they still doubted his power to save.
- 3) The Lord could have been angry about the destructive power of sin and death in this fallen world.
- 4) Or maybe Jesus wept for himself. He knew that Bethany's miracle would lead to Calvary's cross; and a tomb like Lazarus' awaited the Lord.

III. Jesus and Lazarus

They led Jesus to the cave that now served as a mausoleum. A large stone sealed the mouth of the tomb. Jesus wiped the tears from his eyes and then commanded the crowd: "*Take away the stone.*"

The people were shocked. Surely Jesus did not wish to view his friend's body at this late date. The ever-practical Martha objected: "*Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.*" The King James Version translates Mary's words much more succinctly by saying: "*He stinketh!*"

Jesus said to her: "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*" Well, yeah, but this wasn't at all what Martha had in mind! A group of volunteers slowly, reluctantly rolled away the stone.

Then the Lord called in a loud voice: "***Lazarus, COME FORTH!***" Christ's command echoed off the rocks as the crowd waited in expectant silence.

Only a handful of days before **Lazarus** had been alive and well. The illness had struck suddenly. They all assured one another that everything would be well; however, hour-by-hour his condition worsened. Mary and Martha had sent for Jesus; but by day's end, it was already too late.

The final moments were fevered blur in Lazarus' mind. He dimly recalled watching his sisters' tear-stained faces fade to black. He slipped off to sleep . . . and then into death. Lazarus never could clearly remember what happened next. He vaguely recalled how the darkness had been dispelled by a welcoming light. Lazarus experienced an overwhelming sense of well-being and love. He felt like he was returning home to a place he had never been before.

Then Lazarus heard a familiar voice calling him by name. The words seemed to echo from a long distance. He awoke in darkness with claustrophobic strips of cloth binding his body and blinding his eyes. Suddenly he clearly heard the Master's command: "***Lazarus, COME FORTH!***" So he arose from his stone bed and stumbled towards the Lord's voice.

At the mouth of the tomb, the bound man stood on the borderline between darkness and light, death and life, this world and the next. Then he heard Jesus say: "***Unbind him, and let him go!***" As Lazarus approached the light at the end of the tunnel,

he did not know if he was alive or dead, on earth or in heaven. What he DID know was that he had been reunited with the Lord—and that was all that mattered.

IV. The Resurrection and the Life

Since Adam and Eve tasted the forbidden fruit in Eden’s Garden, humanity has suffered the consequences of **sin and death**. Paul summarized the situation when he wrote: *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* (Romans 3: 23) The result is spiritual and physical death. We live in a fallen world and are born to die; and there is nothing WE can do to save ourselves.

In February, we began the season of **Lent on Ash Wednesday**. The service stressed the twin themes of human sinfulness and mortality. During the imposition of ashes, the ministers repeated the words: *“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”* and *“Repent and believe in the Gospel.”*

Ash Wednesday’s message is like the beginning of an old joke: *“I have bad news and worse news.”* The bad news is that we are all sinners. The worse news is that we’re going to die. The Christian faith does not deny these harsh realities—if anything, it emphasizes them.

However, Jesus Christ proclaims God’s GOOD news. Romans 6: 23 states that *“the wages of sin is death, BUT the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord!”* God’s salvation pure **grace**—we have neither earned nor deserved it. When we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, we participate in his death and resurrection. At the cross, our sin was crucified. At the empty tomb, we were raised to new life. The good news is that we have received God’s salvation of forgiveness and life. Our Lord grants us the gift of eternal life: both life AFTER death and life BEFORE death.

Life AFTER Death

On Easter morning, Jesus Christ was raised to new life. The empty tomb declares that death’s power is forever broken. The angelic proclamation echoes in our ears today: *“Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here—HE IS RISEN!”*

Physical death has no more power over God’s people. Our future is not determined by death but faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said: *“He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.”* We no longer need fear the grave for ourselves or those we love. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

There is a story that I love to tell each Easter. For five years, I served the First United Methodist Church of West Point. The town is on the Georgia state line next to Lanett, Alabama. Going down Cherry Drive, the Lanett City Cemetery is on the left. There are two service roads into the graveyard with signs that declare *“No thru way”* and *“No exit!”* On Easter morning, we declare, *“Not any more!”*

In the *Service of Death and Resurrection* in The United Methodist Book of Worship, the opening prayer petitions God: *“When our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live!”*

The events at Bethany foreshadowed Jesus' own resurrection. The final enemy of death has been destroyed. Christ was raised to new life and is the firstborn among the dead. He IS "*the resurrection and the life;*" and God grants this gift to all who believe.

Life BEFORE Death

The Christian faith is not only about life AFTER death but also life BEFORE death. Jesus said: "*Whoever lives and believes in me will never die!*" Earlier in John 10: 10, Christ promised: "*I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly!*"

For the Christian, Easter is both a celebration of Christ's resurrection and anticipation of our own resurrection. The past and future join together in the **present** as we experience a saving relationship with our living Lord. Eternal life does not begin on the far side of the grave but the moment we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

Easter is not an annual celebration but a **daily reality**. We enjoy the first fruits of the resurrection today. We worship on Sundays in remembrance of Christ's resurrection on the first day of the week. Each Sunday is a "*little Easter.*" For Christian believers, EVERY day is a "*little Easter.*"

A people of faith live with the clear-eyed understanding that we are mortal creatures. Every second of life brings us closer to death. This knowledge does not fill us with dread because we possess the promise of Christ's resurrection. HOWEVER, our mortality does remind us that each second is precious and to be lived for God in joyful service. Both a believer's future *and* present are determined by faith in Jesus Christ.

God's people are called to live like we are dying—because we are. Our prayer is "*to live as those who are prepared to die.*" This grants us perspective on life to know what is temporal and eternal, passing and everlasting. We live our lives in the light of eternity, and we realize that we are but pilgrims passing through a foreign land to our heavenly home.

V. Do You Believe This?

The miraculous events at Bethany foreshadowed Jesus' own death and resurrection. We are an Easter people who have also heard the Lord's voice call us by name and command, "*Come forth!*" from sin and death.

Charles Wesley wrote one of the great hymns of the church that traditionally takes the first place of honor in any Methodist hymnal. Two of the verses from *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing* declare:

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean; his blood availed for me.
He speaks, and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive.
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe.
In Christ, your head, you then shall know, shall feel your sins forgiven;
Anticipate your heaven below, and own that love is heaven.*

Today we gather as brothers and sisters of Lazarus, sin-scarred and death-bound. Yet there is a voice that sounds in the darkness offering forgiveness and life. Jesus said to Martha: *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and however lives and believes in me will never die. **DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?**”* Then he acted out the words by raising Lazarus from the dead.

Today we join in an Easter affirmation of faith. **I believe** that Jesus Christ was crucified, dead, and buried; but on the third day he arose from the dead. **I believe** in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

There are moments when we say these words with full confidence; however, other times we are like the person seeking healing from Jesus who said, *“Lord, I believe—help my unbelief.”* There are moments in life when we all struggle with doubt.

A few years ago in an Easter sermon I said that it may be easier to be an **atheist** on Easter than any other time of the year. And you gave me the same look that you are giving me now! But I am not talking about some Madeline O’Hare, ban the Bible from classrooms, full-blown type of “God is dead” atheism. Instead, I am talking about a more subtle, practical type of atheism in which we live AS IF the resurrection had never occurred. Or we allow our doubts to overwhelm us during times of temptation and trial. We struggle to claim and proclaim the words, *“I believe.”*

I was born and raised in the United Methodist Church. I do not recall “learning” *The Apostles’ Creed* or *The Lord’s Prayer*. It is something I have simply known all of my life. As a worship leader, I often find myself leading the congregation in reciting the creed or prayer. After fifty years, there are still moments when I trip over the words and phrases. Or I find myself thinking, *“Do we ask for our daily bread or forgiveness of our trespasses first?” “Is it, ‘whence’ or ‘thence’ he shall come to judge the quick and the dead?”* There are times when my voice grows softer as I allow the congregation around me to speak and remind me of the words.

When Jesus summoned Lazarus from the grave, he commanded the crowd to unbind the burial clothes. It is our faith community that surrounds us with faith when we struggle with doubt.

There are moments in our spiritual lives when we wrestle with belief. In those times, our brothers and sisters speak them for us. And we find ourselves praying, *“Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.”* And there are other grace filled moments when we can declare *“I believe”* with confidence and help others who are struggling to say the words.

Conclusion

Jesus said, *“I AM the resurrection and the life.”* Today our Lord challenges us with the same question that he asked Martha: **“DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?”** And do we live . . . and die like we do? Let us pray:

*O God, who gave us birth,
You are ever more ready to hear that we are to pray.
You know our needs before we ask, and our ignorance in asking.
Give to us now your grace that as we shrink before the mystery of death,*

*We may see the light of eternity.
Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and of death.
Help us to live as those who are prepared to die.
And when our days here are accomplished,
Enable us to die as those who go forth to live,
So that living or dying, our life may be in you,
and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us
from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

(A Service of Death and Resurrection, The United Methodist Book of Worship)