

The Resurrection and the Life

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John 11:23-27

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

In my early days of ministry over twenty years ago, I dreaded meeting with families after a death to plan their loved one's funeral. There is an old chestnut that most clergy would choose to officiate a funeral over a wedding any day, but that was never the case for me.

I think it was a mix of inexperience and immaturity along with a concern that I would be asked questions about what happens after we die, or why God allows tragic things to happen, or what were the consequences of their loved one not really believing in all of the things that we were gathering together to declare at the funeral about the promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

I no longer dread those meetings, but to be clear, it is not because I have figured out the answers to all those questions. It is because, with experience, I have come to realize that first, most people don't ask those questions, and even those who do are often seeking answers that focus on the love they shared with the deceased and the love God has for us all, even in death, and the truth that most things are beyond what we typically think of as knowable.

Our gospel lesson this morning takes us just a few more verses into this lengthy story, which we refer to as the Raising of Lazarus. We have already heard that Lazarus has died and has been buried in his tomb for days. We have heard his debates with confused disciples and the complaints of Lazarus' sister and Jesus' friend Martha, as she voices her disappointment in his late arrival.

In the five verses for this morning, Jesus and Martha have the exact conversation that I didn't think I could handle as a young pastor - a theological conversation about the meaning and promise of resurrection.

Jesus promises Martha that Lazarus will rise. And having no sense of the miracle that was about to take place, Martha affirms her belief in the idea

that there would be a time in the future when the dead would rise from the grave. And then, as he has a habit of doing, Jesus flips the conversation and declares not just that resurrection is a future promise but a present reality - and in fact that he himself is the living incarnation of that promise standing in front of her and available to all who believe. And Martha becomes the very first disciple in the Gospel of John to declare that Jesus is the Messiah, the one they have been waiting for.

These verses bring us to the theological heart of this story – indeed, the heart of John’s whole Gospel. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The one who brings fullness of life in relationship to God, both now and in the future. Both present and future are addressed. On the one hand, believers who die will continue to live through resurrection. Jesus affirms that future promise. But on the other hand, believers have eternal life, the promise of life, long before they reach the funeral home or the end of time.

It is hard to know exactly what first-century Jewish believers understood about the theology of resurrection, what Martha believed when she told Jesus that she knew that her brother would rise again. The New Testament contains multiple instances of debate among Jewish leaders about the concept of resurrection, separate even from the growing belief that Jesus himself had risen from the dead.

Historical Jesus Scholar EP Sanders is reluctant to claim that there was a universal belief in resurrection at the time but Sanders does believe that there was among people a “widespread hope of a new age on this earth, one in which the God of Israel will reign supreme...the hope that God would fundamentally change things was a perfectly reasonable hope for people who read the Bible and believe that God had created the world and had sometimes intervened dramatically to save his people.”¹

¹ EP Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*. 1992

It is hard to know exactly what twenty-first-century Christian believers understand or believe about resurrection. It is just as complicated to discern. While I have sat at many a bedside and heard deep confessions of faith about the life to come, I have had just as many folks share their discomfort with any kind of resurrection talk at all. Case in point: for generations, as Presbyterians, we have used the language of a funeral or memorial service as a Service of Witness to the Resurrection. And so, just like in all Presbyterian Churches, our template for the worship bulletin for a memorial service includes that language on the front: a Service of Witness to the Resurrection. In the overwhelming majority of cases, families will ask to have that language removed.

In contemplating why so many of us as Christians struggle to articulate what we understand or know about the promise of resurrection, New Testament Scholar and now retired President of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Brian Blount, has written this:

“It is no surprise that, though resurrection is arguably the most important element of our faith, all too often we don’t take much time, energy, and striving to get to it. Babies must be born. Children must grow. Young adults must journey. Families must bond. Careers must blossom. Temptations must appear. Trouble must threaten. Crosses must be carried. Victories must be won. Death must be endured. And yet still we hesitate. Anxiously, desperately, even incredulously, we contemplate and consider resurrection. It is as much our destination as it is our destiny. But the rigors of the journey to it divert our attention and shift our focus until what troubles us here overwhelms what promises us there.”²

There is so much today to trouble us here - conflict and anxiety, war and terror, insecurity and incivility, brokenness and uncertainty. As we consider where we put our focus today, if we can believe that the God who created the world will intervene dramatically to save his people, if we can

² Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*. 2014

find it within us to believe in the promise of resurrection today, it is helpful to remember that this is not the first moment in history when people of faith have struggled to remember the promise of resurrection, the promise of life for them in the present in the midst of so much death.

I was nine years old, the first week of August in 1985, spending a week at our local Presbyterian camp with my older brother. That week just happened to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the dropping of two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So, the camp directors made the rather strange decision to make that anniversary the focus of our programs that week. We made paper cranes in the long tradition of the children's peace movement and read the novel *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. I vividly remember reading poems about the pain of living through a nuclear winter. I have to believe, though I don't remember it, that they also talked to us about what it means for Christians to be peacemakers in the world, building a better world than we knew in these last years of the Cold War. What I do remember is that a seed of anxiety was planted within me that continued to grow long after that week of camp. I had this general sense of dread in the wee hours of the night, knowing that human beings had the power to create so much death. While mutually assured destruction was a helpful rationalization for adults, for me as a child, it was paralyzing.

Like many children with anxiety, I slowly grew out of it, but even today I can feel a remnant of its scars within me.

Four years later, my brother spent a year as an exchange student in Germany. In the fall of 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War began its end, he visited the wall and brought back a piece of it. It fits right in the palm of my hand. He kept it in his bedroom, but as soon as he left for college, I moved it into mine. I would find myself holding it and looking at it as a kind of talisman of resurrection hope - hope in human

beings to move beyond war and violence, hope that the world could be good and safe.

Scholar and preacher Veronica Miles has powerfully reflected what this conversation between Jesus and Martha can mean for those of us who are in need of resurrection hope:

“Amid painful circumstances and death-dealing social realities, we yearn for resurrection and the unbinding that releases us to dream beyond the boundaries of experience, life anew. To dream beyond boundaries is to imagine a world in which wholeness, well-being, health, and prosperity are normative expressions of human existence and to partner with the God of life in making that dream a reality. Consider the possibility of resurrection in the lives of the many persons and communities who deeply need God’s presence in the nowness of our existence.”³

The challenge of resurrection faith has always been this: to hold onto God’s promise of life even when the world seems organized around death. In moments like this—when news of war fills our screens and the language of retaliation and escalation becomes ordinary—it can feel as though death has the loudest voice in the world. The conflict with Iran, like so many conflicts before it, reminds us how quickly human beings can mobilize our intelligence, our technology, and our fear in the service of destruction. And yet the claim at the heart of the gospel is that death does not have the final word.

To believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life is not simply to wait patiently for heaven someday. It is to live now as people who refuse to let violence, fear, or despair determine the limits of what is possible. It is to believe that God’s future can break into the present. That is an ancient hope and prayer, and we hear it in the words of the psalmist - “you have

³ Veronica Miles, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A. 2010.

restored my life from the Pit. You have turned my mourning into dancing, you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.”

Resurrection faith does not ask us to look away from the realities of violence and grief in the world. If Jesus truly is the resurrection and the life—not only someday but now—then the church must learn how to stand honestly within the world’s suffering while still refusing to surrender hope.

Stanley Hauerwas, theologian and Christian ethicist, has offered encouragement for the church in this particular moment:

“We pray as people who lament this war and the stories told to justify it. We pray for those who have died and those who will die. We pray for soldiers, not with amorphous calls for safety, but with genuine concern for their hearts and their spiritual health. And we pray for the church—that it would be a place where truth can be told, where wounds can be named, and where the peace of Christ is not just a word but a way of life.”⁴

It is maybe a little strange to have so much talk of resurrection right here in the middle of Lent. To proclaim so clearly the promise of life before we have walked alongside Jesus to his own death.

But Resurrection is already pressing its way into the present. Even here. Even now. Even in a world that so often feels organized around fear, violence, and loss.

Before the stone is rolled away.

Before the empty tomb.

Before she even understands that Lazarus will be raised from the dead, Jesus stands before Martha and makes this astonishing claim: *I am the resurrection and the life.*

⁴ <https://www.christiancentury.org/features/church-cannot-bleed-war>

It is something God is already doing—quietly, stubbornly, insistently—in the midst of a world that cannot yet see it.

And so perhaps Lent is exactly the right time to talk about resurrection. Because the journey toward the cross is meant to teach us how to recognize the promise of resurrection already at work in the world—and to trust that, in the end, it will be the thing that endures. Amen.