

“I Am the Resurrection and the Life” (fn.:JOHN 11 17-44.2019.DOC)

Scripture: John 11:17-44

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John 11:17-44: <sup>17</sup> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup> She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

<sup>28</sup> When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” <sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup> The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” <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.”

This morning I want to suggest that we are brothers and sisters to the faith and faithfulness of three siblings: Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Martha is the first sibling. To her Jesus speaks the words: “I am the resurrection and the life.” Words for her, words for her siblings, and words for us.

Martha’s story begins with a complaint, following the death of her brother Lazarus: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died...but I know God will give you whatever you ask.” And Jesus’ response is “Your brother will rise again”—which Martha seems to take as “My brother Lazarus will be in heaven” when she says, “I believe he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

But Jesus’ response pushes Martha further: “Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life?” And Mary’s answer is “I believe you are the Messiah, the son of God.” In other words, Martha gives the right answer, only she doesn’t fully understand it or trust it.

Consider some of our stories:

- The widow, sitting in the living room and holding a Kleenex gives the right answer. She says her husband is now at peace (only she is not). She says he is better off now (but she feels that nothing will ever feel better to her). She says the right things...but doesn't feel them.
- The parents dressed in bath robes pace the floor waiting on their teenager who is late from prom. They give the right response to each other: by God's good grace and sometimes in spite of indiscreet and poor judgments, most children do survive their teenage years. They say the right things but they don't feel them.
- In their wedding vows, the couple says: "in sickness and in health, in plenty and want"—the right words for marriage. But they didn't understand there would be times that "being sick" meant being sick of each other. They did not know it meant that they would have wants that their partner should have been able to meet but doesn't. And that sometimes they could speak about "plenty" the way it is sung about in the musical *Porgy and Bess*: "I got plenty of nothing."

We give the right answer, say the right words, but it takes living them and there is no substitute for that. Martha gives the right answer to the question of whether she believes. She says that "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of the God."

And when she says it, then she is able to begin to see it. Faith is so often launched as a tentative stretch, like reaching out to grasp a trapeze bar that swings toward us but is out of our reach if we stay on the platform. Only as we launch ourselves off the edge do we grasp that handle. "I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God," says Martha. Whether you are resurrection and life...that will remain to be seen. But, yes, I will reach out. Martha's journey toward the discovery of Jesus as the resurrection and life comes first by acknowledging Jesus as God's presence—she says the right words that will lead to further faith.

But there are other siblings besides Martha. There is Mary—did you note that she stayed home rather than go out to meet Jesus? Mary only goes to meet Jesus when she is prompted by her sister. How many of us come to the faith by the prompts of the Marthas in our lives! Prompts that come from friends, from parents, from siblings. They prompt us to get up and go. Without those prompts, we would simply withdraw. He is waiting for you, Martha says to Mary. And so Mary goes to Jesus.

And Mary's encounter with Jesus begins with the same complaint as Martha: If you had been here, my brother Lazarus would not have died. But with Mary, this complaint is not joined with right words about the resurrection on the last day, about Jesus being the Messiah, and so forth. Mary's complaint is joined with tears.

And Jesus does not tell Mary the right answer and then ask her to believe. No, to Mary, he shares his own tears. Jesus began to cry. Here, passion—both Mary's and Jesus'—is the beginning point of the resurrection and life.

No matter how overdone and manipulative tears can be, there is a power of passion to break through to us. Tears matter! Some twenty years ago, my siblings and I put together a family trip with all our family—my parents, my siblings and spouses, and all the grandchildren. Everyone was in—it was going to be family expedition that everyone would cherish. Some weeks before we were

to go, my parents decided not to go—no particular reason (they were in great health), but just decided the trip was going to be too much trouble. They would send us some money for the trip.

My brother and I talked reasonably to them: You don't want to miss this trip with all your loved ones; you are vital part of all our lives; you have no health challenges to prevent you from going. And so on. We laid out a well-reasoned and argued case for their going. Their answer was "No."

My sister called my parents. She did not reason with them at all. She just cried—her tears and sobs were what they heard. And they immediately said: "We'll go....we'll go." And they did!

For many of us, if not all, our faith discovery of resurrection and life has come with tears—deep emotion that has no words appropriate, no quaint phrases to wrap it up. Jesus shares his tears and Mary's tears. He doesn't tell her that everything will be all right, though in faith, it will be. Jesus doesn't smile knowingly at her tears, anticipating that Lazarus will be resuscitated. Jesus doesn't stand there like a "good soldier," walling off his compassion. He shares his tears with her tears. Passion is what brings her, and many more like her, to the resurrection and life.

And consider the connection to our stories: One of the characteristics of the evangelistic, crusade-style ministry of Billy Graham and the like has been that many tears were shed as people are touched at the center of who they are, their own need for passion. They experienced, not just intellectually, that Jesus died for them. It is somewhat ironic and appropriate that Billy Graham's Crusades, like others, were often held in sports stadiums—a stadium is a place where it is permissible to be passionate, to be caught up in the wave of feeling.

For many of us, our journey of faith has been marked not by understanding and right words, but rather by deep passion, a soulful stirring of our hearts . . . tears. Mary gives no right answer. She simply weeps. She feels deeply. And Jesus resonates; Jesus empathizes; Jesus is there where she is. Jesus is with her at the level of passion—not in right words of assurance.

Two siblings, Mary and Martha—both experience Jesus as the resurrection and the life. Martha comes by way of understanding, right answers, clear expression—"You are the Messiah." Mary comes by way of passion, of emotions, by tears, by what moves within her. But then there is one more sibling . . . Lazarus. And Lazarus is dead.

That's Lazarus story—he is dead! And so his story is different than the good theology of Martha and the deep passion of Mary. Lazarus simply has "providence" on his side. Here's what I mean: He had nothing to do with his return of his life. It just happened. Lazarus' faith experience is just grace, incredible happenstance by God, or providence. And Lazarus has many siblings.

There are a lot of "dead people" walking around—people who just shouldn't be alive...people right here among us who shouldn't be alive.

- Those who have come through a cardiac arrest.
- Those who have run red lights.
- Those who have driven a car while impaired by alcohol.
- Those who have a parent who came home from war when so many did not.

Indeed, you may know this phrase: “There, but for fortune, may go you or I.” There are a lot of us who have no business being alive. It just happened.

Lazarus was a dead man. Perhaps he was like you and me, not really expecting to die. But we may be assured that he did not expect to be resuscitated after four days in the tomb. It just happened.

But do dead people come to the resurrection and life in Christ? Let me tell you about Gerald Sittser, a history professor at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. He was dead—dead because in a car-accident, his wife, his mother, and his four-year old daughter were killed. With their death, he died too.

Oh, he still walked and talked. But a major part of him died in that accident. Stay with me on this, as I read some of his reflections in an article entitled “The Life and Death We Don’t Deserve.” He writes:

. . . I would prefer to take my chances living in a universe in which I get what I do not deserve. . . . That means I will suffer loss, as I already have. Life will end up being far worse than it would otherwise be; it will also end up being far better. I will have to endure the bad I do not deserve; I will also get the good I do not deserve. I dread experiencing the undeserved pain, but it is worth it to me if I can also experience undeserved grace.

If I have learned anything over the past three years, it is that I desperately need and desire the grace of God. Grace has come to me in ways I did not expect. Friends have remained loyal and supportive, in spite of my struggles. Quietness, contentment, and simplicity have gradually found a place in the center of my soul, though I have never been busier. . .

[*He goes on to describe being a single parent to three children*] Despite the fact that I had been a Christian for many years before the accident, since then God has become a living reality to me as never before. My confidence in God is somehow quieter but stronger. I feel little pressure to impress God or prove myself to him; yet I want to serve him with all my heart and strength. My life is full of bounty, even as I continue to feel the pain of loss. Grace is transforming me, and it is wonderful. I have slowly learned where God belongs and have allowed him to assume that place—at the center of life rather than at the periphery.

So, God spare us a life of fairness! To live in a world with grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world might make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We might get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would really be satisfied. A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering.<sup>1</sup>

It will give us life, even in our death! For Lazarus and for Gerald Sittser, the resurrection and life come not because either gave the right answer or because they felt it. It came by chance, by good fortune, or to put it more theologically: by providence and by grace.

Recently, I sat with some fellow pastors and we were lamenting our church demographic situations—all our congregations were getting older and older. Millennials and those younger than

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<sup>1</sup> “The Life and Death We Don’t Deserve,” *The Christian Century*, January 17, 1996, page 47

millennials had little interest in church. The fastest growing religious population in America today is the “Nones” (and I don’t mean the Catholic order of women—nuns). What does the future hold? But one of the pastors noted, “There is a common denominator among those young adults who are active in my congregation—those deeply involved have experienced life traumas. They know that no amount of money or entertainment or pharmaceuticals or adrenaline-rushes can reach the depth of what it means to be human. They know death—the ultimate trauma— and find life in Christ.”

Jesus said: “I am the resurrection and the life.” I am the resurrection and the life for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. For all their siblings. Some of us get there just by accepting the right words and living it. Some of us get there by the passion that wells up within us, trusting that in Jesus, God shares our tears of sadness and joy. And some of us get there by providence, by grace, by life in the midst of trauma, in the midst of death. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.”