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John 11:17-27

A Real Promise: I Am the Resurrection and the Life

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. **18**Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, **19**and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. **20**When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. **21**"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22**But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." **23**Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." **24**Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." **25**Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; **26**and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" **27**"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

Seeing things different

As many of you know this week I struggled with a flu that turned into a respiratory infection. Thank you for your prayers.

I am always amazed at how sickness can make you see things differently. Sickness makes you see your limitations. Sickness makes you see your mortality. Sickness even makes you see entirely too much television. There is nothing worse than bad television when you are sick. Sickness can even cause you to see things in the Bible that you might pass over at another time.

Case-in-point is our reading from John 11. Normally, I look at this passage as a hinge for the gospel of John. Up to this point Jesus said his time had not yet come. From this point on he would say his time has come. In addition, the previous chapters deal with Jesus' ministry whereas the remaining chapters focus on his final week. Even more, it was the raising of Lazarus from the dead that caused the Pharisees to hatch the plan to murder Jesus. This is a pivotal chapter that propels us toward Holy Week.

Normally, I would use this chapter as a springboard. But I do not want to do that. Instead, I want slow down and look at the death of Lazarus in order to see the real pain, confusion, and faith surrounding his death.

Real Pain

With death comes pain. In verses 33-35 we are told, “When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. Jesus wept!”

I am glad Jesus wept. Not because it demonstrates his humanity (though it does). Rather, because Jesus gives us permission to cry. Many of us were raised to keep our emotions in. We were told, “Don’t let your emotions get the best of you.” As a result, we do not know how to respond to death. Do we cry? Do we celebrate? Are we to feel guilty? What if we have no pain, is there something wrong with us? In truth, we do not know how to respond to death. We were never designed to die. We were never designed to handle death.

By crying, Jesus not only reveals how God feels about death (God cries), Jesus gives us permission to cry as well. St. Augustine in his Confessions wrote, “The tears... streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for my heart. On them it rested” (Augustine, Confessions IX, 12).

When I was at seminary, I had an O.T. professor who had written a number of books on the topic of hope in the midst of suffering. My professor was a wonderful man. He also had a wonderful wife who would often join him in the seminary cafeteria for dinner. At the beginning of my senior year, his wife died of a terminal illness. We did not see the professor for a few weeks. When he returned to class, he was cared for by the community. In fact, when he ate in the cafeteria, the students made sure he did not eat alone. After some time I had a chance to talk with him. Over the conversation I asked him, “Are you okay.” He replied, “No I am not okay. I will not be okay until I see my Millie in the resurrection.”

Death is painful. It is painful for us as well as for God. “Jesus wept.”

Real Confusion

Since death is painful, it causes us to ask hard questions. In verse 21, Martha asked Jesus a terribly difficult question, “‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would have not died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’” In other words, “Why didn’t you come earlier?” In verse 32, Mary asked Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” In verse 35, the crowd asked, “Could not Jesus who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” These are hard questions.

Have you ever asked such a question of God? Most of us have. Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost his son at age 25 to a mountain climbing accident, had many questions concerning the death of his son. Wolterstorff writes:

I cannot fit it all together... I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrecter of Jesus Christ.

I also believe that my son's life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss... To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess" (Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament For A Son*, p. 68).

Death is painful and it causes real confusion.

Real Faith

It is in the midst of pain and confusion that there is an opportunity for faith. In fact, it is in our most difficult of times when the promises of God are heard the clearest. This brings us to our passage.

When most of us think of Martha, we think of the busy body sister who waited on Jesus instead of faithful Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus. In this passage, Martha is the faithful one. Listen to verses 20-27:

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. **21**"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22**But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." **23**Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." **24**Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." **25**Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; **26**and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" **27**"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (11:20-27).

In the midst of her despair, Martha was able to say, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." How was she able to say this? Lazarus hadn't been raised yet. She did not get an answer to her question of why Jesus hadn't come earlier. What allowed her to believe was the real promise Jesus spoke to her. Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." Every word is important. "I am" (ego eimi) the Greek name for God. In other words, Jesus is no mere man. Jesus is God incarnate speaking to Martha.

Next, Jesus calls himself the resurrection. Resurrection is an important word. By resurrection, Jesus is referring to the resurrection at the last day when the dead will be raised imperishable. Martha already knew about the resurrection. In verse 24, she said, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." In Jesus' day, many believed that those who lived a life filled with obedience to the law would be raised to eternal life. In fact Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, said that if "a man has obtained a good reputation, he has something of value, but if he has gained for himself the words of the Law he has gained for himself life in the world to

come” (Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 108-109). In other words, a person would be raised from the dead if they were obedient to the law.

Things haven’t changed much in our day. People today think that if they live a good life then they will receive a good resurrection. The problem is how much is enough? How obedient must a person be to the law? How many good deeds must a person do? Do you simply have to do more than the people around you? What if you came from a rotten family? Is there a sliding scale of good works?

When Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life”, Jesus was dismissing such hopeless thinking. Instead, he was telling us that the hope of resurrection is not in our obedience but in Jesus’ love for us. This is a wonderful guarantee. No longer do we have to wonder if we have done enough or even believed enough. Rather, our guarantee is in the love of Jesus. A love that is willing to suffer with us and for us. As the hymn reminds us:

In Christ alone my hope is found; He is my light, my strength, my song:
This cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace, When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My comforter, my all in all – Here is the love of Christ I stand.

Jesus is the resurrection.

Jesus is offering more than just eternity with God. He is also offering life. Listen again, “I am the resurrection and the LIFE.” With these words, Jesus is referring to the here and now. It is the life that comes from being born from above. It is the life that is free from the law. The life that is free from God’s wrath. It is the life the apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 8:10-11 when he writes:

But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. **11**And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Like the resurrection, Jesus is the source of our life:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2**He was with God in the beginning. **3**Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4**In him was life, and that life was the light of men (1:1-4).

By saying, “I am the resurrection and the life” Jesus was making a wonderful promise. He, God incarnate, is the source of resurrection and life.

After hearing these words, Jesus asked if Martha believed. Even though Martha was full of pain and confusion, she was able to say, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (11:27). Her faith came from the wonderful promise spoken by her friend, her Lord, and her God.

Reformation, do you hear the promise of these words? Jesus has promised to be the source of your resurrection and life. He does this out of love. He does not require anything from you. It is his gift that he gladly gives to you. This should not surprise you. You have received many of his gifts already. In the waters of baptism God gave you the Holy Spirit and united you to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the Lord's Supper, God gives you Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. In the absolution, God forgives you all your sins. You are forgiven.

I want to end with this final word. Timothy Wengert, tells about the time when his wife died. Wengert writes:

He leaned over and whispered in my ear. Everything about that action was uncharacteristic for our culture and our relationship. He was my young next-door neighbor Larry, a devout Presbyterian with a wife and two young children. And I was grieving, standing in the receiving line at the funeral of my wife of twenty-seven years, a widower at fifty. When Larry shook my hand, he leaned over and whispered, "Just remember, Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life.'" He could not have known that my dear Barbara had chosen that very selection from the Gospel of John to be read at her funeral, which was to start in twenty minutes. Nor could he have fathomed that of all the wonderful things said to me that day, his would be the only comment I really and truly remembered. Hearing those words was for me like hearing the voice of Jesus as he spoke to the grieving Martha. Those words helped to put me back together (Timothy Wengert, *A Formula For Parish Practice*, p. 47).

Reformation, here once again God's promise to you: I am the resurrection and the life.

**In Jesus' Name,
Amen**