

March 9, 2008
Lent 5

"Resurrection Hope with Jesus"

JOHN 11: 17-27, 38-45

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." ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.

I holding up a word that occurs several times in the words just read to you, a very important word of the Bible. The word is "Resurrection." There is such comfort and peace in this one word especially as we hear Jesus tell us, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even if he dies."

The Greek word for "resurrection" is "anastasis." It is a beautiful sounding word. Join me in saying several times if you do not mind. The word literally means to stand up again. We have the hope that we will stand up again in the future even after our bodies are laid to rest after death.

People seem to live longer these days, stand up longer, if you will. It is not uncommon to hear of people who reach the age of ninety and some even a hundred. But eventually the time comes for all of us when we can no longer stand up on our own. Our bodies lie down in bed, people take care of us and eventually we die. Watching someone getting weaker and weaker and eventually dying is very difficult. That is what Mary and Martha had to observe when their brother Lazarus became sick. They watched his body become weaker and weaker until he was not able to get up from the bed, and eventually he died. They

wrapped his dead body with strips of cloth and spices with the hope that his body would be raised up on the last day.

All of us gathered here this morning will experience times in our lives when we say goodbye to people we love. We see them go from standing up and being vibrant and healthy, to going down into a bed, eventually dying and then being placed into a grave. What a blessing it is to see them go down with Jesus as their Savior at their side. What a blessing to know that Jesus will raise them to life again in the resurrection on the last day.

We see people we love go down with Jesus

Jesus came to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany and found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Earlier that week Jesus received the message from Mary and Martha, "Lord, the one you love is sick." We are not told what the sickness was but it had to be life threatening for them to send a special messenger to Jesus. The sisters watched in horror as their healthy brother who was much loved in the community and had lots of friends was suddenly taken ill. Lazarus went quickly from someone who stood up in the community and enjoyed being around family and friends, to someone lying in a bed, giving up his last breath, and then lying down in a tomb.

I think of one of the hymns in our hymn book that says, "Who know when death may overtake me! Time passes on my end draws near. How swiftly can my breath forsake me! How soon can life's last hour appear! My God for Jesus' sake I pray, Your peace may bless my dying day."

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. Her first words were, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." When Jesus first heard the news that Lazarus was sick he did not immediately drop everything and travel as fast as possible to be there. The earlier part of this chapter says that Jesus stayed where he was two more days before starting off to be with his friends whom he dearly loved. Did Jesus delay for two days because he didn't care, or didn't take the sickness seriously, or was too tired to make the trip? Not Jesus. He told his disciples that this sickness would be for God's glory. We may be tempted to think Jesus does not care for us if he does not answer our prayers for our loved one to be healed immediately. But then we leave it in the Lord's hands. We think of the hymn that says, "I leave all things to God's direction; He loves me both in wealth and woe....My fortress and my rock is he. What pleases God, that pleases me." Martha knew that she could leave things in the Lord's hands. That is why she said, "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

It is such a comfort to have Jesus with us when we find our bodies slowly going from standing up and healthy to lying down and being sick, and eventually breathing our last in death. Lazarus was privileged to have his two lovely sisters, Mary and Martha at his side as he died. They were there by his side to remind him of the love that Jesus had for him, and the hope of being raised to life again, and being together again. Death has a sting attached to it. 1 Corinthians 15 tells us that the sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law. When we die we don't always dwell on the good things we have done in life and find peace and comfort in them. Satan has a way of bringing up our past sins, torturing

us one more time, condemning us and make us unworthy. That is why it is so important we have our Christian family around us reading to us from the Bible, praying with us, and reminding us of the simple truth that will bring peace to us, "the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin." Mary and Martha were there to comfort Lazarus.

As ugly as death is when it claims people we love, there is a beauty when we can see people enter into that valley with their loving Shepherd at their side as we say in Psalm 23, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou are with me, Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." When Susan's mother was dying of cancer that warm day in August in the San Fernando Valley, we gathered around her bed in the evening, read Scriptures to her, and then sang one of her favorite hymns, "Jesus Your Blood and Righteousness." Her eyes were closed as we sang several stanzas and then stopped, thinking she had fallen asleep. Her eyes opened again as she said, "Aren't there more verses?" And so we sang on, "Lord I believe were sinners more Than sands upon the ocean shore, You have for all a ransom paid, For all a full atonement made." Going down into the valley of death will be one of the most difficult journeys you will ever make in life. Seeing people we love enter into that dark valley is so hard, but then it becomes so beautiful when they go down into death with Jesus as Lazarus did with his two sisters at his side.

We see people we love rise again with Jesus

We not only see people go down with Jesus, but with our eyes of faith we see them rise again on the last day . Jesus told Martha, "Your brother will rise again!" Martha responds with such a beautiful faith and trust. Never mind if she was the one busy in the kitchen when Mary sat at Jesus' feet. Here she shines. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." That's what she and Mary believed. That is what Jesus taught them. Christians love to gather around each other and sing hymns reminding each other of the resurrection that is coming soon when we will see each other again. There is a reason Christians buried their dead with palm branches. They wanted to symbolize the hope of waving palms in victory after the resurrection on the last day.

Then Jesus gives us these precious words heard at almost every Christian funeral or at the graves of our loved ones. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will never die." He does not say "I offer the resurrection from the dead" or "I make it available to you." No, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." By using the words "I am" Jesus reminds us that he is Lord and God. The words "I am" reflect the name of the Lord found in the Old Testament. Jesus said, " I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Way, the truth and the Life and I am the light of the world." Through faith we participate in what Christ is. Each one of us can joyfully say from these words of Jesus "I am the resurrection": "That's my resurrection from the dead also." Remember the confidence of Job who said, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes-- I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"

Martha, the dear sister to Mary and Lazarus, shines even more brightly in her resurrection faith and hope as she says, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." There is no doubt about the resurrection because she knew who Jesus was, the Son of God, the Christ, her Savior, the Lord of life and death.

That is the great hope that we have as we stare death in the face.

If this account of the death of Lazarus ended here, we could go home greatly comforted by what we have just enjoyed here together. But there is more. Jesus faces the enemy of death, stares it in its ugly smelly face and proves himself victorious. "Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with the stone laid across it." Jesus was deeply moved. He groaned within himself, moved emotionally as he had been only a few minutes before when he wept. Here is the mighty God, also the Son of Man touched by our human emotions and feelings, especially when there is death. It is OK to cry when someone we love dies, because Jesus cried and death is an enemy. It was not something God designed for us in a perfect world.

Jesus calls for the stone to be rolled away from the tomb. Martha, dear Jesus-loving, faith-shining, resurrection-believing Martha intervenes, ever the practical woman she was. "But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there for four days." Expensive linens and costly spices encased the body of her brother, but that would not be enough to stave off the stench of four days of decay. Then Jesus assures her again, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" He looks up to his Father and prays so all can hear, "Father, I thank you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here."

Lots of people had come to pay their respects even though it was four days since Lazarus died. These privileged people heard Jesus cry out with a loud voice, "Lazarus come out!" These privileged people saw Lazarus, stand up again and stumble out of the grave, still wrapped in clothes and spices. These privileged people hear Jesus say, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." These privileged people were able to gather around and watch as the clothes were unwrapped. I have always wondered if there was even a hint the smell of death on those grave clothes. I doubt it. All of his friends were there, his many friends, shaking his hand, hugging him, weeping tears of joy. I can't wait for the resurrection on the last day. How about you? Even so Lord Jesus, come quickly. That hope defines our lives. Amen.