



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“I Am the Resurrection and the Life”

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John 11:17-26

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Our text this morning is the story of the raising of Lazarus, *not* the story of Jesus’s Resurrection. I’ll admit, that is highly unusual for Easter. Why not focus on the Resurrection story today? It’s Easter, after all. We’ve been focusing on the Gospel of John during the present sermon series. We could use John’s beautiful telling of the Easter story this morning. But as beautiful as that story is, we risk missing the essential meaning of the Resurrection story if we don’t read it in light of what Jesus says in *this* passage at the tomb of Lazarus.

Over the past seven weeks, we have been exploring the “I am” sayings of Jesus found in the Gospel of John. These seven sayings remind us of God’s self-revelation to Moses at the burning bush: *I AM*. Jesus’s “I am” sayings are moments when Jesus revealed who he is in relation to God. Each of them also reveals much about who *we* are in relation to Jesus. Today we come to the final saying: “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

Like the Easter story, this story happens at a gravesite. Jesus was asked to go to Bethany by his friends Martha and Mary, whose brother Lazarus was seriously ill. Though he knew the request was urgent, Jesus had remained where he was for two additional days before making the journey. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had died.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. We can hear in her words a tone of bitterness: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” But she remained hopeful. “Yet even now, I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you.” *I know*. What did she know? What did she expect? What did she hope?

Jesus says to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

“I know he will rise in the resurrection on the last day,” she answers.

Martha *believes* in Jesus, as her words will attest in the verse that follows our reading for today. “I believe that you are the Christ, God’s son, the one who is coming into the world.” She believes that Jesus is the “one who is coming” and that her brother “will rise in the resurrection on the last day.” Martha’s grief is in the present, but her hope is not. She hasn’t yet grasped that the one who stands before her is the living presence of God.

Jesus says to her, “*I am* the resurrection and the life.” *The hope you have in the future is right before your eyes, Martha, here and now. You see what you expect to see, but I’m offering you so much more.*

“Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” At first, it sounds Jesus has said the same thing twice. But he didn’t. Jesus said first, “Whoever *believes* in me will live, even though they die.” *Death* is transformed into *life* for those who believe. But Jesus also said, “Everyone who *lives* and *believes* in me will never die.” That is to say, *life itself* is transformed for those who believe, leading to eternal life. Believing affects the believer’s *life* as well as their death.

To say that Jesus is the *Resurrection* means that our *future* is determined not by our death, but by faith in Jesus. To say that Jesus is the *Life* means that our *present* is also determined by faith in Jesus, experienced as the gift of eternal life. Jesus is *the God we can know*, the One who holds our hope – both in the future and in the present.

To demonstrate his power over death to Martha and Mary, those gathered around them, and for all who would one day hear the story, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was restored to life and reunited with his sisters. As signs go, this was the ultimate demonstration of power. And it made quite an impression. After the raising of Lazarus, Jesus’s supporters rushed to follow him. His opponents plotted to kill him...and to kill Lazarus, as we learn in the next chapter. Despite the dramatic restoration Jesus’s action brought, Lazarus’s condition wasn’t permanent. He would eventually die again of something else. Such is the reality of the human condition, even for a life touched by Jesus. Life on earth is a terminal condition. But it foreshadowed the Resurrection of Jesus to come, a rising to life that *is* permanent, carrying with it an eternal promise for all who believe.

What happened to Lazarus that day was a resuscitation – his lifeless body was restored to life for a time. The Resurrection of Jesus on Easter was a rising to *new* life, a triumph over death itself. It holds a future promise but also a present reality. We don't have to wait until we die to experience the life he offers.

The problem for us arises when we mistake resurrection for resuscitation. Too often, we're looking for a *resuscitation* when we're being offered a *resurrection*. Think about it for a moment. When things are going against us, how do most of us pray? *Lord, make things the way they used to be*. Our vision is limited to what we know, especially in times of pain. But I'm increasingly convinced, Church, that *God isn't interested in providing resuscitation*. God wants us to experience *resurrection*.

Instead of praying for things to be the way they were before, what if we prayed for things to be the way we never imagined they could be? When a relationship is ending, instead of praying for it to continue, maybe we should pray that both people would grow from their experience and emerge as better formed people. When a loved one is dying, instead of praying that their life would be prolonged, what if we prayed for every moment we have left to be filled with meaning and love? Instead of praying to be released from pain, perhaps we should be praying that we would be transformed by our pain to become more patient and compassionate. Instead of asking God to deliver our preferred future, we should pray for God to lead us into a future we've never imagined, the future that God wants for us. *Jesus doesn't simply restore. He transforms.*

For over two years, we've prayed for an end to the pandemic. Many of us hoped that the virus would simply run its course and disappear. Others imagined that a vaccine would deliver us from the pandemic, that enough people would be vaccinated that we could eliminate the public health risk like we once did with polio. Though it's becoming increasingly apparent that some form of this virus will be with us long term, some are still waiting for things to go back to the way they were, longing for a return to life as it was. That may never happen. And maybe that's okay. No, let me be so bold as to say that *it can be better than okay*.

Instead of looking for a resuscitation, what if we set our sights on resurrection? We've learned some incredibly valuable lessons, many of them the hard way. We've suffered the fallout of runaway self-interest. We've witnessed the consequences of distorting facts and denying science. We've experienced the toxicity of racial hatred, glossed-over history, and winner-take-all politics. But we've also learned the power of community solidarity. We've been inspired by heroics of healthcare providers and essential workers. We've been privileged to take part in a movement bringing light in the darkness as we've made and given away masks, checked on our neighbors, shared food, offered vaccines, and hosted ongoing blood drives. We've innovated in ministry in ways we never would have were it not for a pandemic. We've learned to use technology to reconnect with friends and loved ones and discovered that we could be more resilient than we imagined we were. Faith or desperation drove many to their knees in prayer who rarely did before. And I believe that God isn't finished with us yet. Our losses have been many and great. But why would we want a restoration to what was, when God is inviting us to what might yet be?

Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb...They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus... Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

Our faith in the Risen Christ offers us the promise of eternal life. He also came so that we might live life more abundantly, experiencing new life for ourselves and radiating that hope to everyone around us. Do not look for resuscitation, when what God offers us is resurrection. Live in the hope of that promise today, friends. *Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*