

4. I Am the Resurrection and the Life

John 11.17-26

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Over the years of ministry some of the most difficult times have been when the telephone rings to tell me that a person has died, or when I have been standing by the bedside of a person who has finally come to the end of their life journey and passes into the presence of God.

Words are usually not spoken – but a holy quietness prevails as the grief process begins.

The scene of today's scripture is at the tomb of Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary. They are two sisters with different personalities; but two sisters who have shared the same grief – and story – at the loss of their brother.

Mary is the sister who loved to sit and listen to Jesus. Martha was the sister who loved to serve others. And Jesus had deliberately waited until Lazarus was dead before he showed up.

My seminary preaching professor, Dr. Donald E. Demaray, writes in his book Mile Markers asking the question,

“Have you noticed how Mary and Martha always stand in contrast with one another? Mary waits; Martha works. Mary listens; Martha speaks. Mary sits at home; Martha runs out to meet Jesus. In today's world we are tempted, as Martha, to give Mary the failing grade. After all, the go-getters win, right?”

Evelyn Underhill, the British mystic, flies a caution flag here. We get so tied up in busyness that we *lose* life. Martha, always *doing* things – even very good things – runs the risk of losing contact with the Source of Life. Underhill uses strong language: we *maim* ourselves by overdoing. With exhaustion comes “loss of depth and vision.” This results in “vagueness and ineffectuality of a great deal of the work that is done for God.” She goes on to say that total surrender to the “click-click” of life and its demands results in spiritual deadness.

Underhill insists that we must engage in “quiet contact” with the world of the supernatural. But, she observes, we use our lives conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have, and to Do. “Craving, clutching, and fussing, on the material, political, social, emotional, intellectual – even on the religious – plane, we are kept in perpetual unrest: forgetting that none of these verbs has ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by, and included in, the fundamental verb, to Be: and that Being, not wanting, having, and doing, is the essence of a spiritual life” (*Classics Devotional Bible*, p. 1250) [Demaray, Donald E., Mile Markers. Nappanee, Indiana, 2007, p. 90].

After the two sisters have spoken to Jesus about their wonderings as to why he didn't come to them straightaway, he spoke words to them that have special meaning for all those who hope.

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though they were dead, yet they will live. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. [John 11.25-26]

And Jesus followed those words with a question: *Do you believe this?*

The disciples had followed Jesus back to Judea – even though that trip could cost them their lives. Indeed, it would put an even higher price on Jesus' head. The leaders of the religious aristocracy now wanted Jesus dead. And after this miraculous event, they wanted Lazarus dead, too!

Following a discussion about Lazarus "falling asleep" and the disciples saying "if he has fallen asleep he will be all right" – Jesus finally says, "Lazarus is dead" (verse 14).

Those were, and still are, hard words to hear.

How well I remember being asked to tell the young children of an Army officer that their father had died. The 13 year-old knew and understood; but the family wanted *me* to come to their home and tell the 5 year-old twins. The entire extended family was gathered in the home as the five year-old boys waited expectantly for me to speak. I couldn't say to them, "Your father is asleep in Jesus" or they would never want to go to bed again, especially with any reference to this *Jesus* guy. I couldn't just say, "He's gone to be with God" or they'd never want to even think of such a thing. I had to use the words, "Your father has died" and then find some metaphor about death that they could understand. So I asked them if they ever had a pet that had died. They both got quite animated and said, "We had a goldfish that died!" Having buried my own goldfish in a matchbox at the age of five, and thinking that I finally hit explanatory pay dirt, I asked what they did with their goldfish. They both smiled broadly and proudly told me, "Daddy flushed him down the toilet!" The best I could do amidst the relatives covering their mouths to stifle out loud laughs was to say, "Isn't that neat that your goldfish could be in the water forever?" Then the boys went off to play.

Demaray speaks further [[Mile Markers](#)] about not denying death, even though some cults may say that death does not exist.

The Christian faith, taking the clue from Jesus, never denies death. Denial, one of the common stages of grief, seems to rob us of facing a loved one's death. We just can't believe that a person has gone, never to return.

Jesus did not deny death. But He did alert us to life. He wanted us to know the fact of resurrection both in the next life and in *this one* [italics mine], too [Ibid, p. 94].

Resurrection is about life *now*.

At the spot of Lazarus' tomb Jesus shows his own emotion: *Jesus wept*. [Verse 35, the shortest verse in the Bible]

Finally, with the crowd watching to see what he would do, Jesus called out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" [Verse 43]

When Lazarus finally appeared at the opening of the tomb, Jesus spoke to those gathered about him saying, "Unbind him, and let him go!" [Verse 44]

To me, these words are even more intriguing than the "come forth" command – for these words invite *others* to participate in the "community" action of unbinding Lazarus.

When we find someone in bondage, are we willing to assist in the process of *loosing them and helping them to be let go*?

When we refuse to let [even help] someone go, when we refuse to forgive, when we refuse to see new life, it is we who are keeping them dead. The community has that power.

[Show chain.]

Why do people so often choose to live in the chains of bondage to anything that takes away the joy of living? Why would we make choices that take away life while we still have breath?

Jesus, therefore, proclaims to all of us, to the Christian church: "I am the resurrection and the life. Unbind him, and let him go." Those are really the powerful words of this gospel for today. Don't hold on to the past. Don't hold on to sin that is designed to defeat us [yank chain]. Don't hold on to death!

Let someone go today. Release them. Help them to seek life – *with* you – in the resurrected Jesus.

Let go of anything that binds you and takes away the possibility of resurrection – *now*.

Amen.