

Sermon for Sunday, April 2, 2017

And the Life

In John's gospel there are seven sign stories; seven events where Jesus performs a miracle; turning water into wine, healing the son of a royal official, healing a paralytic, feeding the five thousand, walking on water, restoring the sight of a blind man and today the seventh sign, the raising of Lazarus.

Like a road sign that tells you how many miles are left between you and your final destination, the sign itself points you in the direction you want to go.

It's similar in John's gospel, the miracle isn't the full story, instead, each sign is meant to point us to the truth of who Jesus is—and in today's text we are not only given the final sign but also an "I am statement"—where Jesus declares "I am the resurrection and the life"...

We have a tendency to focus on the first part of this statement, "I am the resurrection"...but what does it mean for Jesus to be the life?

With this question in mind, let's go back to the story.

Mary and Martha had witnessed Jesus do some incredible things—not only that but they had a very close relationship with him. So when Lazarus's health took a turn for the worst, they reached out with the firm hope and expectation that Jesus would intervene and heal their brother—they sent a message, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

But when Jesus received the message he declared that the illness would not result in Lazarus' death but rather it was for God's glory, so the Son of God would be glorified through it." So he and the disciples stayed where they were for two more days.

After two days, Jesus and the disciples begin to make their way back to Bethany. But word traveled fast—so when Martha heard that Jesus was on his way, she hurried out to meet him.

Without mincing words, Martha let Jesus know exactly what was on her mind "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Martha knew who Jesus was—but she also wasn't afraid to express her grief and heartache. She had expected him to show up, to cure Lazarus from his illness as she had seen Jesus do for so many others...but this time death had come, and it had been four days since they had laid Lazarus in the tomb.

Timing is important—because in the Jewish belief, the soul or spirit of the person left the body after three days in the grave. For Lazarus it had been four. There was no question in anyone's mind that Lazarus was really dead.

It's in the midst of this conversation that Jesus makes the statement: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

It's in light of these words that Martha declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. With this, Martha heads back and tells Mary that Jesus is just outside of town and asking for her.

But unlike Martha, Mary isn't up for a theological debate. When she reaches Jesus, she falls at his feet weeping and utters her truth: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."

When Jesus sees her and the people she is with weeping, the text says that “he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

But the word “disturbed” isn’t a strong enough translation for the Greek word behind it—which is often used to talk about “suppressed rage”. It’s such a strong, visceral emotion that words fail to capture it.

While the text doesn’t explain why Jesus is upset, what happens next gives us a clue. After Mary falls at his feet Jesus asks where Lazarus’ body has been laid and they begin to lead him to the tomb—it’s then that we get one of the shortest verses in the bible: Jesus began to weep.

There is something about seeing Mary and the others with her weeping that causes this strong almost uncontrollable emotion inside Jesus...

So what if Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Resurrection and the Life, is angry and filled with rage, not at Mary or Martha, or the others who are weeping over the loss of the one they loved so much...but what if he’s angry at the existence of death—the very fact that we as human beings experience the severing of relationship—a severing that feels permanent and causes our hearts to break? And what if the tears Jesus sheds are out of grief, mourning and solidarity, because in Mary’s tears he sees just how much she loves her brother and the anguish she is enduring?

God created us to be in relationship with God, each other and even creation—so when those relationships are broken it not only causes God to grieve but in this passage we also see that it causes a holy rage—because this is not what God intended—but it is why Jesus has come—to restore relationship and bring new life even where it looks as though there’s only death.

So it’s in the middle of all of this, and in the midst of Mary and Martha’s grief, that Jesus, the resurrection and the life, walks with the sisters to the tomb of their brother.

But we have to pause here—because there’s still a statement and a question hanging in the air:

“Lord if you have been here...”

“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

This statement and question sound so familiar...I’m pretty sure I’ve asked them myself—with friends and family, and with some of you. Because when we read the sign stories, and all of the gospels, they reveal that Jesus is capable of incredible things—and yet, for some reason death still comes. And not just physical death, but relational and emotional death too.

We mourn when we don’t get into the colleges we dreamed about, or don’t receive the call back we really, really wanted. We have to let go of dreams that we’ve worked toward for years and sometimes mourn the loss of expectations. We have to grieve the loss of health and the restrictions that can come with age. And no matter how much we attempt to put it off or dress it up we cannot avoid death.

So, what does it mean for Jesus to not only be the resurrection but also the life?

What if it means that, whether the deaths we experience are physical or emotional—God in the flesh grieves along-side us?

Because, while the text is silent on this, we know that Mary and Martha had to walk to the tomb of their brother Lazarus, carrying their grief and questions—but we also know that they were accompanied by the resurrection and the life—the one who spoke light out of darkness, who called order out of chaos and who holds the power to breathe new life into dry bones, this was the one who walked alongside them, mourning the pain they were experiencing, and grieving alongside them all the way to the tomb.

In a few moments we are going to gather around this table—we will break the bread and pour the cup as a reminder that even though Christ went to the cross and it looked as though death had won, not even death could hold God in the tomb.

Dear friends, what we face is very real, our pain and heartaches can’t be side stepped, glossed over or ignored. But Because of Christ, death does not have the final word—he is the resurrection and the life, now and always. Amen

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