

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
March 17, 2002
5th Sunday in Lent

“The Resurrection and The Life”
John 11:1-45

It may seem premature to read a passage about Resurrection during the season of Lent. This seems like a word we should hear during the Easter season;

but the Lectionary gives us this series of long narratives from the gospel of John, and this story about the raising of Jesus’ friend Lazarus revolves around

this announcement by Jesus:

I am the Resurrection and the Life.

This awesome statement that Jesus makes sheds light on an otherwise very dark story;

a story which is as much about the power of Death which Jesus overcomes as about the life which comes after.

The whole story is permeated with an ominous foreshadowing of Jesus’ own death –

there’s the mention of the geography: Jesus is going to Bethany,

which, John points out, is near Jerusalem, a place of danger for Jesus;

and the disciples’ warning about the people who were just trying to stone Jesus;

and Thomas is openly resigned to following Jesus to the death,

which he expects is very near.

Even more so, as Jesus draws near to Lazarus’ tomb,

and sees Mary weeping

and encounters the mourners who accompany her,

we are aware of the forbidding presence of death.

Jesus becomes *greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved*

(the Greek literally means “angry and agitated”)

angry, perhaps, at the ongoing suffering of humankind

who are bound to live under the dark shadow of death.

But despite all of these ominous undertones,

throughout this occasion, the gospel of John portrays Jesus as fully confident.

He never doubts that God’s glory and power and life will have the final say,

and in this assurance, he is able to walk toward the tomb of his friend

and toward the city of his own impending demise,

toward the people who are plotting to kill him,

in order to do what the glory of God requires.

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And we walk with Jesus, through these solemn days of Lent

as we engage in prayer, and introspection, and self-denial

as we face our own humanity, our own mortality.

But as we walk this journey, we go as those who know the whole story of Lazarus,
and the whole story of Jesus
and because we know the whole story
we can walk with the same confidence Jesus feels on this occasion.

We can face our mortal life,
and whatever terrors may threaten our life, even the threat of death,
with the confidence Jesus felt
as he approached the tomb of his friend in Bethany
and his own tomb in Jerusalem.

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This confidence of Jesus – this confidence which is available to us –
rests on the amazing proclamation contained in this little exchange between
Jesus and Martha:

Martha said to Jesus,
“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.”
Jesus said to her,
“Your brother will rise again.”
Martha said to him,
“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”
Jesus said to her,
“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.
Do you believe this?”

Martha expresses the traditional Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead
on the last day.

(Though not every one in the Jewish community believed in the resurrection of
the dead, this is what the Pharisees taught, and what Martha believed.)

Their community was not unlike our community in this way:

Bodily resurrection is a belief that many professing Christians struggle with today.

Though it is a doctrine central to the New Testament
and to historical Christian orthodoxy;

Though we affirm it each Sunday that we say the Apostles’ Creed in worship –

“I believe in ... the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting”;

We still have questions about bodily resurrection:

If all the believers are raised, where will we put everyone?

What kind of body will we have? A young one? An old one?

Will this new body grow old? Will it grow at all? Will babies born anymore?

Who can imagine a world without babies? Will they grow older?

Will the earth keep getting bigger to accommodate everyone who is born
but never dies?

...and on and on we go,
trying to understand bodily resurrection,
and the corresponding belief in a new heaven and a new earth.

Though the Apostle Paul does delve into some of these questions in his letters
(particularly in 1st Corinthians),

Jesus does not seek to *explain* the mystery here in this story.

Jesus simply announces Resurrection and Life,

or rather, he offers it

to Martha...and to us.

Do you believe this?

He offers it, and in his offer, it becomes a possibility

for those who believe.

(I don't know about you, but I am thankful that he makes *belief* –

rather than understanding – the entry point into life.

Belief in Resurrection is at least possible for a human being,

with the grace of God.

Understanding may not be.)

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And so Jesus offers Resurrection and Life,

and then goes on to lend authority to his offer

by actually doing it – he raises Lazarus from the dead!

Lazarus, it has often been said, was “raised here to die again”.

He will live for a while, die again,

and wait in death for the resurrection of the dead on the last day.

But Jesus announcement of resurrection is greater than this one man,

greater than any single life.

Jesus announcement of Resurrection and Life is COSMIC in scale.

Jesus is not just the friend of Lazarus, or Mary, or Martha,

but he is the One sent by God;

the God who *created* Lazarus' body,

the bodies of Mary and Martha

your body, my body,

everybody, the body of the earth, and the heavenly bodies.

Resurrection is not just about individual bodies – individual lives –

Resurrection is about the redemption of the whole world

the whole world which God created.

Remember Genesis:

In the beginning... God created the heavens and the earth...

And God saw that it was good...

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good(!)

This God sent Jesus

for the sake of all of that goodness, all of the good creation.
Lazarus' life, Mary's and Martha's lives, your life, and my life
our created, bodily lives,
are part of that good creation Jesus came to save.

{ I don't think of myself as a Fundamentalist,
but I believe that this is a *fundamental* truth of scripture:
What God creates is good, and God created our physical bodies;
so when God sets out to save the world,
when God sends God's Son to save the lost,
God does not intend that any part of the good creation should be left out.
Eternal Life – which is the Christian hope – could never be a body-less life.
If God truly saves the world which God created,
then Eternal Life can only be full-bodied life
in the fullness of God's good creation,
as it was originally intended to be. }

That is simply to say, as plainly as I can,
I believe in the resurrection of the *body*.

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Jesus actually says two things about Resurrection and Life:
Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,
(which is a statement about the future)
And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
(which is a statement about right NOW).

So whether “here and now” in this life, or “there and then” in the next life,
Eternal life is life in the body enjoying the goodness of God's creation.

Look for a moment at the cross here in our sanctuary.
It is a Celtic Cross (a cross with a circle).

The Celts became Christians around 500 AD,
and found that many of their cultural traditions were compatible with the Christian faith.
When they became Christians, the Celts stopped worshipping the Sun
and worshipped instead the creator of the Sun,
and not only the Sun, but everything.

The circle, which had once been a sign representing the Sun,
became a sign to represent God the Creator.

The Celtic Cross unites this circle as a symbol of God the Creator,
with the Cross of Christ, as a symbol of God the Savior:

A beautiful and rich symbol of the Christian faith,
because the Christian faith refuses to separate these two beliefs about God:
God who Creates is God who Saves, and God Saves what God Creates.

Our belief in the Resurrection of the Body,
with the corresponding belief of the new heaven and the new earth,
is the ultimate affirmation of this unity
The Resurrection of the Body is the ultimate affirmation
of the goodness of God's creation,
and that everything God makes is worth saving, including *your body*.
And just as we don't pretend to understand how God created the world the first time,
we need not understand how God will fashion the new creation the final time.
We just believe in the Resurrection of the Body & the Life Everlasting.

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In this season of Lent, as we ponder our earthly life, our mortality,
let us also savor the goodness and love of God
who sent Jesus the Son to save us, body and soul,
for everlasting life.
May the love and goodness of God who created us,
unbind us from the power of death
and set us free.

Amen.