

“I AM...the Resurrection and the Life”

John 11:17-27

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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They say the only two things in life that are certain are death and taxes. And while we often like to complain about taxes, nobody really likes to talk about death. We don't even want to think about it. Today modern medicine has made so many advances that we now see death as almost unnatural. Death has always been our great enemy and something we often fear. But the reality is that the mortality rate is still 100%.

In the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John we learn that Jesus' dear friend Lazarus is sick and it looks like he's dying. His sisters Mary and Martha send word for Jesus to come quickly. John tells us that Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters. So it seems odd that when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick he intentionally stayed where he was for two more days.

So often when you and I experience some kind of tragedy we replay the events in our minds and end up thinking, "if only I had done this differently," or "if only we could have diagnosed this sooner." When Jesus finally goes to Bethany Martha does the same thing. She says, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Martha knew Jesus well. She had seen the way Jesus healed people and she was confident that he could have healed Lazarus as well. If only.

Jesus didn't need to be there to heal Lazarus. In John 4 an official whose child was sick with a fever came to Jesus and asked him to come heal the child. Jesus tells the man to go home because his son will live. He could have done the same for Lazarus. He didn't heal Lazarus on purpose and he is clear with his disciples that it's so their faith and your faith can be strengthened and God glorified. It was so Jesus' identity would become obvious.

Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will rise again. Martha assumes that Jesus is talking about being raised to heaven. Not all Jews agreed on this concept. The Sadducees didn't believe in a resurrection but the Pharisees did. Martha says, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." It's reasonable

for her to think that way for two reasons. One, her brother has been in the tomb for four days and she's never heard of anyone coming back after that long. It would be a miracle. And second, she trusts God's promises of resurrection to eternal life.

Jesus uses this as a teachable moment. He doesn't tell her she's wrong, because she's not. Instead he affirms her belief by saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." For those of us who are united to Christ, physical death is not the end. He has promised to come for us so we may spend eternity with him. But then Jesus adds, "and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

As we've learned the past few weeks, when Jesus says, "I AM," he's really making quite a bold statement. In each of these "I AM" statements Jesus is really saying, "I am God." When God speaks to Moses in the burning bush, Moses says to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God answers, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.'"

The Jewish people considered the personal name of God so holy that they wouldn't even say it out loud. When the Temple soldiers come to arrest Jesus he asks them who they are looking for. They say, "we're looking for Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answers, "I AM." He uses the personal name of God for himself. The soldiers immediately fall to the ground. It was a shocking thing to hear it out loud.

Jesus isn't just telling Martha that there is going to be a resurrection of believers in the future. He's saying that he is the power behind that resurrection and he's even the source of life itself. He asks her if she believes this and she says, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

The question for you today is do YOU believe it? What would it take for you to believe? What kind of proof would you need? We didn't read the rest of the story of Lazarus but basically what happens is that they go to the cemetery and Jesus asks them to roll the stone away from the entrance. Martha tries to stop him because there will be an odor. But they move the stone away and Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb. He is alive again. John tells us that there were many people from Jerusalem there and that many of them believed in Jesus after this.

Of course raising Lazarus was a foreshadowing of what was to come. In a few days time Jesus would be the one in the tomb and a few days later he would be the one walking out alive again. Friends, this is the heart of the gospel, the good news. In a sense Jesus raising Lazarus is the real story of Easter. The Bible is clear from the very beginning that even though our physical bodies are alive we are born into death. But Jesus can and will give you life if you believe in him. He said, "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly."

I think there are two meanings of life here. The first is eternal life with God. This is what Martha was thinking about. Jesus promises that we can spend eternity with him. This is what he meant when he said, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." Your body is going to give out at some point. We don't know when but we can't avoid it. Jesus assures us, though, that our moment of physical death is not the end. And in several places God tells us in his Word that at the resurrection we will get new glorified bodies, much like Jesus after his resurrection.

The second meaning, though, is that eternal life actually begins now in *this* life. You can experience transformation now. In 1918 a notorious criminal, Tokichi Ishii, was hanged in Tokyo. He had been to prison many times and was never sorry for his crimes. He was sentenced to death for murder. While in prison he was visited by a couple of women who were Christian missionaries. The man refused to talk to them but they left a copy of the New Testament with him, which he decided to read. He couldn't put it down. He was especially interested in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus and was grabbed by Jesus saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That sentence transformed his life. He later wrote, "I stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if by a five-inch nail. What did the verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart I believed." Tokichi Ishii was a changed man and an amazing witness to the power of God. While locked in a 6x9 cell he experienced Jesus as the resurrection and the life. He understood what Jesus meant when he said, "everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

Two thousand years ago Jesus was brutally tortured, nailed to a cross, and died a painful death. He was sealed in a tomb. But on that first Easter Sunday he walked out of that tomb, proving that he is the resurrection and the life, proving that everything he promises is true. So what about you? Do you believe this? He is risen!

Amen.