

Today we're looking at the Lazarus resurrection event, in which we get Jesus' final "I Am" statement. Next Sunday we'll begin a whole new series that will take us through Labor Day weekend, and it's titled, "Personal Jesus." We'll be looking at several encounters Jesus has with individual people, and what we learn about Jesus and what it means to follow him and be in relationship with Him. So that starts next week.

Now, it's important to know that the passage we just read is really in the middle of this whole event. Lazarus is a friend of Jesus' and the brother of two sisters who are also his friends – Mary and Martha. They get word to Jesus that Lazarus is seriously ill, with the implied request for him to come and visit. But Jesus waits a couple of days to take care of some other things, and in that time Lazarus dies. We're told that by the time Jesus gets to the area, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. And in that day, after a death the body was buried very quickly, often on the same day that the person died. Quite frankly, it was just a matter of practicality and necessity, given the warm climate and the lack of refrigeration capabilities. And therefore out of respect for the deceased and their family, a dead body was taken care of quite quickly after death.

The other thing that was very common in that day was for friends and family to come and be with the immediate family of the deceased. Lots of people would show up – and they would be with them for a few days. So when Jesus comes to Mary and Martha, there are many people already with them, as was their custom.

Then we read that **Martha went out and met Jesus before he got to their house, while Mary stayed at home (John 11:20)**. The other famous story that we have involving Mary and Martha is recorded in the gospel according to Luke. In that story it is again Martha who is action oriented. She's the one who stays in the kitchen cooking up a storm, while Mary sits at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching. And John shows us the same characteristics here. Martha is the one who just can't sit still, always has to be moving and

doing something – she probably has a touch of ADD, or she's a Martha Stewart prototype, always taking care of others :) – and when she hears that Jesus is on his way, she heads out to meet him before he even gets to their home.

So Martha goes out to Jesus, and here's what we read next: **Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died' (John 11:21).** How many times have we said something like that to somebody, or at least wanted to say something like that? Maybe to God, maybe to a family member or a close friend...“Why didn't you get here sooner?...Where were you?...What took you so long?” These are the kinds of things we say when someone doesn't meet our expectations and lets us down. And we see that happening here as she expresses her disappointment.

We're also told that many of Mary's and Martha's fellow Jewish friends and family have come to comfort them. Some may have even gotten there while Lazarus was still alive, or at least soon after their grief really began to set in with his death. But they were comforted by the community of faith. And isn't that the way it should be in the Church: that the community of faith – not necessarily any one person – but the community is the extension of God's arms of compassion and mercy? That we are all his hands and feet? This is one of the things I love about Rose Hill. There is a great sense of community and care. It's not perfect...I'm sure that for any of you who've been here for years can remember a time when the church was more like Jesus here – a little slow to respond.

But by-and-large, this is a place where people are cared for when times are tough – an elderly person who needs a ride to a doctor's appointment, visits in the hospital, notes/cards/phone calls with words of encouragement or sympathy when someone is grieving. I remember last spring, and in earlier spring seasons as well, that a few of you heard that one of our daughters was playing on a Little League fast-pitch softball team, and came and watched one or two of her games and cheered her on. We see this sense of community being carried out through structured ministries of our Deacons, the Parish Ministry, and in relationships that people forge in small groups and in classes, and in all kinds of informal ways as well as God's people come together here

at Rose Hill and simply get to know one another and develop relationships and care for one another.

And that's what happens here in this passage. Jesus didn't get to Lazarus until it was too late, but the community of faith extended compassion and love, and surrounded Mary and Martha in their time of need. So Martha comes to Jesus, expresses her frustration that Jesus showed up too late to help, and: **Then she follows up her statement of disappointment with several incredible statements of faith, right in the midst of grieving her own brother's death.**

First off, after she expresses her frustration with Jesus, she immediately dives into saying that in spite of this, she trusts and believes that God will give Jesus whatever he asks for. We don't know what Jesus was thinking at the moment she said that, but I have to imagine that he was thinking something along the lines of, “Honey, you don't even know how true that is.” What *she* believed in saying this is really hard to say as well. Maybe she believed that Jesus could and would bring Lazarus back from the dead right then – but if that was the case, then I don't know why she would worry about Jesus arriving too late. Plus, when Jesus responds that Lazarus will rise again, she presumes Jesus means the resurrection for all those who are faithful to God at the end of time – which is another statement of faith she makes here. So she's not thinking that Lazarus is going to be sitting at the dinner table that night. But she shows this incredible ability to trust God no matter what the circumstances are.

Then, in response to her statement about the resurrection on the last day, **Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 17:25).** It's a completely stunning and out of the box claim to make. And once again, through another “I Am” statement, we see here that Jesus is revealing who he is. He's not just a mere human being like every other human who's ever been conceived. He has origins from somewhere else. For Jesus to say that he is “the resurrection” is a claim to divinity. God extends resurrection to those who are faithful to him – that was the Jewish way of thinking, as it is for Christianity, which grows out of Judaism. But Jesus takes it even further and says that he *is* the resurrection. It's not just that he makes resurrection possible, or offers it to others, which he does; but it's what he is. It's his

nature. And so it's a claim to being something more than meets the eye, to being more than human, to being more than flesh and bones, to being more than a wise, kind, and good teacher. It's a claim and a revelation that he is not of this world, that he is God in the flesh. Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Then he continues on to say, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Then, and remember her brother has just died a few days ago, he asks her, "do you believe this?" And she says "Yes."

Ok, now Martha's brother has just died, and Jesus says that those who believe in him will never die. We know that Jesus and Lazarus were close friends. In fact, near the beginning of chapter 11, and also a few verses after this morning's passage, we're told that Jesus loved Lazarus. The implication of this is that Lazarus believed in Jesus Christ, much as Martha confesses her own belief here. So there's a sense of faith that they have in Jesus. They "believe in" him. And those are the people Jesus says won't die. And yet Martha just buried her dead brother in a tomb, and now Jesus is telling her that those who believe in him will never die, and he's asking her if she believes this! What on earth is going on here! Did Jesus forget that Lazarus just died? Did Martha forget?

A couple weeks ago my family was about ready to head out the door somewhere. And I was gathering up the things that I needed: my phone, my wallet, my keys, and my sunglasses. And this was in the midst of making sure that everyone else had everything they needed. So it wasn't like a quick process. But somehow in the process of gathering those things, I set one of them down. I think it was my keys. I got to the point where I had everything and was ready to go, but I could not find my keys. I had just had them like 2 minutes before. They weren't in the car, they weren't on the kitchen counter or table, not on the bed, not on my dresser. I looked everywhere I could've set them down. My family was helping, I kept saying, "I just had them...where could they be!" I must've said that like half a dozen times as we searched. And then I found them, and honestly, I don't remember where they were, in fact, maybe it was my wallet and not my keys...but let's say it was my keys...and I do remember thinking: "Oh, I haven't been there at all today...I guess I never *did* have my keys earlier!" I thought I'd had them and

then set them down, but I realized: I never even had them to begin with! And I'm having conversations with my self about all of this, that my family can clearly listen in on, and they have to be wondering when it's all said and done: Can't dad remember what he just did – that he never did have his keys to begin with? Is he ok? Is he crazy? And we see it here with Jesus. "Believe in me and you'll never die." And yet Lazarus did believe in him and he's now dead! Are they already forgetting? Is Jesus crazy? Is Martha crazy? I'm pretty sure not...

So what does Jesus mean that he is the resurrection and the life, and if we believe, even though we die: we will live; and if we live and believe we will never die? (Don't even need Lazarus – the statements themselves sound contradictory!)

So what's he saying? It is this: **Through believing in Jesus Christ we can have real life right now, and that real life will not die.** This is a *spiritual* condition he is referring to, that we experience here and now in our physical bodies (though the experience is tainted because of our bodies), but then it carries on into eternity when our physical bodies die. Martha thought Jesus was too late to help Lazarus, but with Jesus, it is never too late for someone to believe and have life. It doesn't matter how spiritually dead we are, it is never too late for Jesus to resurrect a life that is dead in sin and give real life to that person right now, and that real life lasts into eternity. It was true then, and it's still true for you and me today.

There is a little book that was written by Tokichi Ishii in the early 1900's called, "A Gentleman in Prison." It is his autobiography, which he wrote while in prison. He was a notorious criminal and was on "death row." He was caught up in sin in ways that very few people are. A couple of Christian missionaries came through the prison handing out copies of the New Testament. He talked a little with the missionaries who would stop by occasionally, but he had no genuine interest in Christianity. Then, some time later, at a time when he was feeling particularly low about his life of crime, he decided to read the New Testament. It took him a couple of tries to really get into it and believe that maybe what he was reading was real. Then, he writes in his autobiography, **"I went on, and my attention was taken by these words: 'And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not**

what they do.” I was stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if pierced by a five-inch nail. What did the verse reveal to me?...I do not know what to call it. I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart, I believed. Through this simple sentence I was led into the whole of Christianity” (A Gentleman in Prison: The Story of Tokichi Ishii).ⁱ

Tokichi Ishii was a man caught up in sin and all its trappings, but when opened up to Jesus Christ, even his life experienced resurrection. It is never too late to experience the resurrection power of Jesus Christ in our lives, and it is never too late to live life as Jesus intended it. On August 17th, 1918, Tokichi Ishii was executed in the Tokyo prison because of his crimes. A letter from the prison to a friend of Ishii's said, “He faced death rejoicing greatly in the grace of God, and with steadiness and quietness of heart.” Even in the confines of prison Tokichi Ishii knew life as God intended it.

You know, we don't need to go anywhere to experience prison (ironic in light of 4th of July this last week). Our sins do it for us. We all experience our own prison when we let sin rule our lives. And even though we are physically alive, we are in actuality dead until Jesus Christ comes in and sets us free. Remember the movie “The Sixth Sense” when the boy has that line, “I see dead people walking?” That's what we all are until the Holy Spirit comes into our lives through faith in Jesus Christ. We're dead people walking. We can be so wrapped up in ourselves that we are dead to others around us. We can be so involved with petty dishonesties and deceptions that we are dead to honor. We can be so caught up in lies that we are dead to truth. We can be so addicted to things of this world that we become enslaved to them and we're dead to the life of freedom that Jesus offers. We can be so seduced by financial wealth that we miss out on the riches that Jesus offers. But Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life, and it's never too late to experience that power in our lives and live life to the full as he intends.

So here's how to understand what he says. He says, **“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die (physically), they will live (spiritually), and everyone who lives (spiritually while physically alive) and believes in me (while physically alive) will never die (spiritually).”** So the life that we experience here in communion with Jesus Christ doesn't die. Like the Energizer bunny: It keeps going, and going, and

going. I came across this quote in a commentary that helped me to understand this: **“Since Jesus is the resurrection and the life, Christian existence in Christ is life before death!...and since [this life] is life in union with the Lord who conquered death, death cannot touch it” (George Beasley-Murray, Word Biblical Commentary, John, p. 201).**

I love those three words, “life before death.” It's a nice turn on the words we usually speak - “life after death.” And in those words, and in what Jesus is saying, we see that when we are living in a true relationship with Jesus now, this “life before death” is a spiritual vitality, a spiritual reality that we experience now, *and* it is what we experience in life after death. All of this together is the Good News of Jesus Christ!

As Jesus did with Martha, he stands before you, and in the midst of pain and loss in your life – whether that describes you right now or it’s coming somewhere further down the road – he asks: **Do you believe this?** Do you and I believe that Jesus Christ really is who he claimed to be? Do we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? Do we believe in him and trust him that our lives can be resurrected right now and for eternity? You can experience the resurrection power of Jesus Christ right now in your life, and trust that Jesus Christ will carry that resurrection power into the life to come. This one who is the great I Am, who spoke Creation into being, who walked the face of the earth, who died, who was raised from the grave...He is the resurrection and the life, and He invites you to believe in Him. To do that doesn’t mean you have all your questions answered. Every single one of us here has unanswered questions – including me. But the life of Jesus is so convincing that I cannot help but believe him, and believe in Him. I hope you might also believe in Him so that you’ll experience the life he has to offer you right now (“life before death”) and into eternity (life after death), because Jesus really is the Resurrection and the Life. Let's pray...Amen.

i This book can actually be read online at

https://archive.org/stream/gentlemaninpriso00ishiuoft/gentlemaninpriso00ishiuoft_djvu.txt