

Sunday March 26th, 2023

Lent V

John 11:1-45

“There is Always Hope”

And now it's time for one of my favourite stories, and I apologize if I've told you this before. In a scene right out of Main St. Canada, there was a group of friends who met regularly to share coffee and swap stories at the local donut shop. Usually, they talked of politics and sports, but on one occasion the conversation drifted to the rather grim subject of death.

One of the friends looked up from his double/double and asked the others, “What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?” After some careful contemplation, one of the friends answered, “I would want people to say ‘He was a great husband and father, an example for many to follow.’” Another friend replied, “I would want people to say, ‘He was a great humanitarian, who cared for his community.’”

Another said that he hoped people would admire his faith and commitment to the church. And so, the conversation went, with each suggesting warm platitudes about themselves, they hoped would be conveyed at their funerals. Finally, one of the friends who had been quite quiet during this exchange, and was obviously deep in thought answered, “Personally, I would hope at my funeral someone would say, ‘Look, he's still moving!’”

Death; it is really something we would rather not talk about. As a pastor I have encountered all kinds of reactions and behaviors associated with death. Some people try to lessen the blow of death. We use euphemisms like: “He has passed away, gone to glory, graduated, or called home”. We use these phrases, all in the hopes of easing our discomfort.

For some, the discomfort in thinking about their own inevitable death, leads to some careless behavior. I am thinking primarily of the reckless avoidance of preparing a will, or power of attorney documents. Others avoid buying life insurance, thinking it is a declaration that you are betting on your own life. We also have, come up with bad theology, to try and bring us comfort.

Ideas with no biblical support like, when a child dies, they become an angel. Actually, in the wonderful musical “*Joseph and the Techno-colour Dream Coat*” there is one song that carries the line in response to Jacob getting the news of Joseph's death, “there is one more angel in heaven, one more star in the sky.” Entertaining yes, comforting maybe, but truthful, no! No one likes to confront death, save maybe the undertaker.

Sensing this avoidance of death, Emmanuel Kant, the German philosopher, wrote extensively about what he called the “existential anxiety”. Existential anxiety is what Kant labeled; the anxiety we feel every time we have to face death. It is the anxiety we feel when we go to a funeral home, a memorial service, or to see a terminally ill friend or loved one. Seeing death played out in someone else's life, forces us, Kant says, to confront our own mortality.

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Death rips a hole in the heart of the survivors; a hole that never really heals.

A professor of mine, Dr. Ken Jackson, was asked a question in a course on “Death and Dying” that I was taking with him. He was asked if, “the pain we feel after someone dies ever goes away?” His answer has stayed with me all these years, for he said in reply, “No, the pain never goes away, it just lessens in severity.”

Therefore, it is with some trepidation, that we go to Bethany of Judea, to the home of some of Jesus’ dearest and closest friends, where death has wrought its destruction. Into this home, where Jesus had often come to get away from the pressures of his life and ministry. A place he went to kind of let his hair down. A place where death had brought pain, loss and separation.

Knowing of the deep bond between Jesus and Lazarus, word was sent to Jesus of Lazarus’ being quite ill; actually, he was dying. I suspect strongly that this message was sent, in the hope that Jesus would come quickly and heal Lazarus, but oddly enough, we read that Jesus lingers a couple of more days before heading to Bethany. It is odd because when someone in my family, or in my care dies, I go as soon as possible to be with the family, but Jesus waits.

In what is clearly an intentional delay, Lazarus died, and according to the Jewish custom, he was buried the same day he died. It was a necessary precaution, given the warm climate and the possibility for disease.

According to custom, Lazarus’ body would have been wrapped tightly with cloths, which were sprinkle with spices and perfumes. According to custom, the family and friends would be in mourning for 30 days. During this time, friends and relatives would come to comfort the living, and mourn the dead. Often, they would demonstrate their grief visually by dressing in sackcloth and sprinkle ashes and dirt over themselves.

They would act out their grief in dramatic fashion, by weeping and tearing at their hair. The result of this death on the family would be demonstrated as family and friends would literally ransack the house by turning over furniture, and smashing pottery; all with the purpose of portraying that a thief had broken in and stolen away their loved one. Death in Judaism is a robber, taking precious loved ones without any warning.

Into this traumatic scene Jesus enters. To say it was a grim experience to come to Bethany, on this particular occasion, would be an understatement. To the best of our knowledge, Lazarus was a young man, maybe about Jesus’ age, who had never married, because he still lived with his sisters. He was a man cut down in the very prime of his life. Martha, learning that Jesus was approaching Bethany, ran out to meet him. And what were the very first words recorded as coming out of her mouth?

Martha’s words were born of anguish and pain, “Lord, if only you had been here, our brother would not have died.” How many times have we, or those we know who are grieving, echoed similar sentiments? “If only...” “If only the doctors had discovered the cancer sooner...”

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If only he hadn't decided to drive on those slippery roads... "If only I had been more attentive to what the child was doing..."

Sadly, we all know, "If onlys" don't change a thing! Death always seems to have the last word and dwelling on the "if onlys" serves only to feed our guilt and pain. Jesus seeing this terrible scene of grief, and hearing the cutting words from Martha, reacts as most of us would. John 11:35, the shortest verse in the bible reads, "Jesus wept." Were his tears born of sorrow, for his own loss of his friend?

Were they tears of compassion; over the grief his friends were experiencing? I think it was all this and probably much more. Twice in this passage we read that Jesus was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled." These words suggest not just sadness, but anger-outrage at what death had done to this family, to this community. I believe that Jesus was provoked by the havoc death wreaks when it invades human experience, and when it leaves: fear, pain, grief and loss.

I also believe that this righteous anger at what death had done, was part of the motivation that convinced Jesus to do something about this thing called death. That on this day, at least, death would not have the last word.

Like a warrior strapping on his sword, like a champion calling for his next opponent, Jesus says to Martha, "Where have you laid him?" In other words, "Take me to him. Bring on that challenger death." It is in the exchange of words, as Jesus' motivation builds, that he makes what his contemporaries and maybe many of us today would think of as an outrageous claim. In verse 25 Jesus says, "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

Those words play really well at funerals, and especially at Easter, but what exactly do they mean? He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever believes in me will never die." This is a difficult verse. It sounds like doublespeak. If we want to understand these words, we need to first pause and reflect on what exactly death is. How would you define the word death?

A child therapist who works with grieving children asked them to share their thoughts about death. Gilda, age eight, said, "When you die, they put you in a box and bury you in the ground because you don't look so good." Stephanie, age nine, said, "When you die, you don't have to do homework in heaven, unless your teacher is there." Ten-year-old Raymond said, "A good doctor can help you so you won't die. A bad doctor sends you to heaven." (Bryan Wilkerson)

We might find such childish opinions amusing, but I am not so sure we can do any better. What is death? Some would say that death is simply a chemical, biological phenomenon: the heart stops beating, neurons stop firing, that's it. If that is so, why does it feel like so much more is going on? Some say that death is simply the end of existence. But why do we have such an incurable longing for the eternal, for a life beyond this one?

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Why do people talk as though those who died still live on, somewhere, somehow? I think death is best described as “separation”. First of all, it is a separation of our bodies from our souls. When we die, our souls leave the physical body. So, death is not an end, but rather a separation. That is why when we look at our loved one in a casket, we are never satisfied, because the body is there, but we know the person isn’t.

Death is also a separation of people from one another. Someone who’s been a part of our lives is no longer a part of our lives when they die, and we feel that loss. That is why, no matter how much time has passed, even many years; we can still feel overcome by feelings of loss, when we think of a loved one who has died. Death is separation. Well, if death is separation, then resurrection must be restoration and reunion.

Restoration of body and spirit-not the old, mortal body, which turns to dust, but a new, glorified body, fit for heaven. When Jesus says, “I am the resurrection...he who believes in me will live, even though he dies,” he is announcing his victory over physical death. Promising that even though believers will die physically-our bodies will be separated from our spirits-in the life to come we will be restored as whole persons. We won’t spend eternity as disembodied spirits, drifting through the cosmos.

Jesus also said, “I am the life...whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” With those powerful words, Jesus is announcing victory over spiritual death. Just as physical death separates us from our loved ones, spiritual death separates us from God. Human beings were created to be in fellowship with God. To be spiritually dead is to be cut off, separated from God. When Jesus says, “I am the Life,” he is saying that whoever believes in him, will no longer be separated from God-not in this life and not in the life to come.

To be human, to live, is to be a whole person-body and spirit-in relationship with others and in fellowship with God. When death comes, like a thief, it separates what was meant to be together. Physical death separates us from each other, and spiritual death separates us from God. That is some pretty heavy stuff to absorb in one sitting, so let me explain it another way.

Have you ever been somewhere special, with someone you love dearly? Perhaps it is on a park bench, or a warm sandy beach, or it front of a roaring fire in a family room. In moments such as this, have ever experienced the sensation that this; is a perfect moment. Actually, there is a car company that has an add out right now that shows a man speeding down an Australian highway, talking about that perfect moment. But it can’t be perfect because he is alone.

I am talking about those perfect moments where you just feel right with your special friend or loved one, right with God and right with the universe. Maybe in such moments you can’t help but remember a song of praise that reflects your hearts response to the gift given in your relationship with God and your companion. That is life, body and mind united in the moment, and the whole thing bathed in the goodness and presence of God.

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Death robs us of that. It separates body from spirit. It tears us away from the one's we love. If we are not prepared, it can cut us off from God forever. Death is a thief. It is an enemy. It haunts every day of our lives. And when we encounter it-when we hear of a house fire, a high school shooting, or the death of a friend-it stops us in our tracks.

That is why Jesus announced, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." That is why he girded up for battle and said, "Take me to him". In verse 39 we pick up the story as Jesus comes to the tomb. "Take the stone away" he commanded. But Martha warned, "By this time there is a bad odour, for he has been in there four days."

Perhaps she believed Jesus wanted to see his friend and grieve for him, but I suspect there is more to her caution. I suspect she knew what Jesus was going to attempt. Do you hear what she is saying? "It's a nice thought Jesus, but you can't beat death. No one can." But Jesus wasn't listening: "he called out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'"

How it happened, we don't know. But at the sound of his voice, the stench of death was replaced by the sweet perfume of life. Skin that was cold and hard was suddenly soft and warm. Muscles stiff with rigor mortis, flexed with strength. The heart beat once, then twice, and blood flowed through his veins. Lungs filled with air, nerve endings twitched, and electrical impulses sent a message to his brain: "I'm alive!" I'm alive! Jesus is calling my name!"

That day Jesus confronted the great enemy and he won. Because Jesus is the resurrection and the life, death need no longer separate body from spirit, people from one another, and persons from God. Though we die physically, we can receive back our bodies and our loved ones. Though we came into this world spiritually dead, separated from God by sin, we can be restored with God, in this life, and in the life to come.

Do you believe this? That's the question Jesus asked Martha that day in Bethany. And that is the question he asks you today. Do you believe this? I ask this, because Jesus' claim of being the resurrection and the life, only applies to those who believe it; those who accept it as true and commit themselves to following the one who made the claim, namely Jesus Christ.

George Herbert the English Poet who lived from 1593 to 1633 expresses this truth well. Herbert writes, "Death used to be an executioner, but the Gospel has made him just a gardener." Death may put the seeds (that is you and I) in the ground to perish, but God through Christ causes new life to come from that death.

For those who claim to have believed it, I want to remind you that on this day in Bethany, death didn't have the last word; Jesus did. And this is what he said: Take off the grave clothes, and let him go. Turn him loose. Set him free. Let him live! That's what Jesus says to you today. Take off the robes of death, squash the existential anxiety within you and embrace the life offered in Christ.