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# I am the resurrection and the life

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## I AM the resurrection and the life

Part of the sermon series: "I AM... the transforming promises of our Savior"

Preached Sunday, March 16, 2008

By David Tinney

Text: John 11:17-27

Theme: Jesus' statement that he was the resurrection and the life empowered Martha and empowers us today to think outside the grave.

The story goes that a priest was being honored at his retirement dinner after 25 years in the parish. A leading local politician and member of the congregation was chosen to make the presentation and give a little speech at the dinner. He was delayed, so the priest decided to say his own few words while they waited.

"I got my first impression of the parish from the first confession I heard here. I thought I had been assigned to a terrible place. The very first person who entered my confessional told me he had stolen a television set and, when questioned by the police, was able to lie his way out of it. He had stolen money from his parents, embezzled from his employer, had an affair with his boss's wife, and had taken illegal drugs. I was appalled. But as the days went on I knew that my people were not all like that and I had, indeed, come to a fine parish full of good and loving people."

Just as the priest finished his talk, the politician arrived full of apologies at being late. He immediately began to make the presentation and gave his talk. "I'll never forget the first day our parish priest arrived," said the politician. "In fact, I had the honor of being the first one to go to him in confession." The moral of the story is never, never, never be late.

In today's sermon Jesus is late. In fact he is purposefully late and as a result he is able to raise a dear friend from the grave and reveal his true purpose for coming to humankind. Let us pray...

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Today, as you have witnessed by the parade of our youth, is Palm Sunday and traditionally we would be reading the entrance text and I would be preaching about how Christ entered Jerusalem to initiate the events of Passion or Holy Week. But I am going to back up slightly and examine an event that happened prior to the entrance on a donkey that I think sets the stage for Christ's death and resurrection. I am doing this for two reasons. The first is that I am doing a series on the "I AM statements" in the gospel of John and this is the nearest and best statement to the Palm Sunday story. But I am also doing it because this story if properly read provides the high ground in the book of John where we can look back at all the miracles and signs that Jesus has accomplished and try to make sense of his ministry and then look forward to the troubling future and try to connect the two. By examining this story we are able to try to wrap our minds around the statement "I am the resurrection and the life" and to see if we can think outside the grave.

*(reminder to take out the sermon notes)*

Our *Disciple Bible Study* has just completed two weeks on the gospel of John so there are dozens of experts among you right now. They could tell you that John is often called the "book of signs" because in the first 12 chapters there are seven signs or miracles that are supposed to clarify Jesus' ministry and glorify God. They include: turning water to wine, the healing of the official's son, healing of the paralytic at the pool, feeding the 5,000, walking on water, the healing of the man who was blind from birth, and Lazarus as he was raised from the dead. These miracles are always done in public so that non-believers might see Christ's glory and believe.

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John is written very differently than say the gospel of Mark. In this gospel Jesus speaks in parables the disciples never understand and works miracles and then tells the recipients to not speak a word to anyone. But in John there are no parables for confusion and all the signs are done so that people will understand who Jesus was. In fact in the latter four signs Jesus links the miracle with an "I AM statement." When he feeds the 5,000 he says, "I am the bread." When he walks on water he says, "I AM do not be afraid." When he heals the blind man he says, "I am the light of the world." In today's text when he raises Lazarus from the tomb he says, "I am the resurrection and the life." Each miracle and statement combo is to reveal who Christ was so there can be no mistake about his mission and purpose.

Let me retell today's story and in the process try to make it your own. The story begins earlier than where today's reading started. Jesus and the disciples are somewhere around the Jordan River when he gets word that his good friend Lazarus is so ill that it could lead to death. The opening verses of the story drive home the message that Lazarus and his two sisters Mary and Martha are the ones Jesus loves and that there is a special relationship at stake here. So Jesus hears the bad news and waits. He knows that his good friend is going to die and yet he waits for two full days to go and do something. The text says that he does this so "God and the Son of God will be glorified."

I would like to take a quick aside in this story for clarification. This past Wednesday in Disciple I told the class that this word "glorified" is difficult for us to understand today. By today's definition it means to make something appear greater than it really is. But as this word is being used by Christ it means, "to make God present" or "to make Jesus present" to those around so they can see and understand.

Back to the story... Jesus waits for two days. Some contend that it was to make sure that Lazarus was completely dead and that there was no doubt that he was physically and spiritually gone. In those days there were some who believed the spirit hung around for a period of three days before descending to sheol, so by waiting one more day there would be no question. Another theory is that in the gospel of John, Jesus was always doing things according to his time. He was on a divine schedule not a human one so he did this to emphasize his control. I don't think this is the full reason but I like this because it teaches me a lesson for my own prayer life. How many times have I prayed for things to be done on my schedule forgetting the fact that Christ is in charge?

The last theory is that Jesus was waiting because he knew that as soon as he raised his friend it would initiate a series of events that would lead to his own death. He needed to wait for his disciples to grasp the future. Regardless, he waits two days and finally arrives in Bethany and is greeted by a highly agitated Martha. Do you remember this family from Bethany from the famous Mary and Martha story in Luke? Let me freshen your memories. The threesome live about two miles outside of Jerusalem and it seems they have more than once provided Jesus with a place to stay and renew. Lazarus is one of Jesus' best friends. In fact there is speculation that he might be the secret disciple who is known as "the one Jesus loved." Whether that is true or not is not important, what is important is Jesus had a very close relationship with him.

Mary was the one in the story who sat at the feet of Jesus and listened. She was the laid back, go-with-the-flow, devotee who "did the better thing" and gave Christ her complete attention. Then there was Martha. Poor Martha, she has taken a lot of abuse over the years. This compulsive, high-strung, type-A doer, this woman of lists, this woman of pots and pans and chores and obligations has really gotten a raw deal in church circles and here we see her again. She approaches Jesus in full type-A armor. I would like to take the rest of the story from her perspective because it makes the story even more meaningful.

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Just as Martha took a “Martha Stewart-like” approach to hosting Jesus in the story in Luke, I am sure she took the same busy approach to preparing for her brother’s death and funeral. I can almost see her scurrying around his bed, checking temperatures, applying warm compresses, and making sure medications were taken at just the right time – never settling in the chair nearby to simply listen and pray. When he died it was on to other tasks like preparing the body, securing the tomb, calling the neighbors, and making arrangements for people to come and mourn. When she heard that Jesus was nearby she was out the door and in his face.

“Lord, if you had just come earlier my brother would not have died,” she said in a strikingly staccato manner. There was no welcome. No embrace. No offering of hospitality. These were words of a woman who takes great joy in putting big check marks on a list of to-dos. Is there anyone here who is like that? Sometimes I get so goal oriented I like to not only put a giant check mark next to the task but also draw a big line through it. People like Martha don’t like it when assignments are mishandled and to her way of thinking Jesus had just dropped the ball and she let him know it.

Lord, if you had just come when you were summoned, if you had just been more dutiful, if you weren’t like my sister (she probably never said it but I bet she thought it) then my brother would still be alive. Now here is the great part. She still wants him to do something and she believes he has the power to do it. She says, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” That proves to me that even though she was busy in the kitchen all those times that Jesus and the boys came to visit she was still listening. She may not have been sitting at the feet of Jesus but she still learned and had faith in his powerful connection with God.

I believe it was for this moment that Jesus waited those two days. It was so he could have this opportunity to break into Martha’s life and the lives of all those who were present to make the ultimate statement of his ministry thus far. “Martha,” he says, “your brother will rise again.” She like so many who encounter Jesus responded with limited human knowledge. She responded by thinking inside the box. “Yes I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” It was a concept of general resurrection at some future time that was accepted by some Jews of the day.

But Jesus wants her to think outside the grave. He challenges her to think about eternal life right now. “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?”

Let that question hang in the air for a while. Let it hang just like it did on that dusty street as Jesus waited for an answer. Remember who Martha was. Remember that she had just looked face-to-face with death and it had just taken her beloved brother. Remember that she had dutifully prepared his body and as practical as she was she knew in her heart that it was rotting and decomposing in the tomb only a few yards away.

I imagine in this moment she longed to go rushing back to the security of her kitchen where she could bury herself in tasks and not have to make a decision. Isn’t that what we do sometimes? I imagine she started thinking to herself, my sister the impractical one would say yes to this in a moment but I am the practical one and I don’t want to be foolish. Isn’t that what we do sometimes? I would imagine she started thinking I know the power of illness and the grasp of the grave and now Jesus wants me to think outside the grave. Is such thinking possible? Isn’t that what we say sometimes?

Martha in all of her practicality, in all of her humanness, in all of her reluctance to think outside the box of possibilities is just like each of us sitting in this room. Now hear her response. “I BELIEVE! YES LORD I BELIEVE! I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into this world!” It is a powerful confession of faith and it opens her eyes to a new way of seeing Jesus.

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The story continues as we know with Jesus meeting Mary along the way. She is overwrought with emotion and when Jesus lays eyes on her his eyes fill with tears. The threesome makes their way through the crowd of critical onlookers and Jesus stands in front of the sealed tomb and he asks for the rock to be rolled back. "Take away the stone," he commands. Martha, who is still making sense of her confession or faith, resorts to old habits and reminds Jesus that the body is going to smell. I love the Old King James version of the Bible here because she says in that translation, "Lord, he stinketh." Four days in the tomb and one would expect stinketh!

Jesus responds, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Then he shouts into the darkness of the grave "Lazarus come out!" The Light of the World speaks into the darkness of world and his words break the hold of death. Out marches Lazarus, still wrapped in funeral cloth and stinking of death. "Unbind him and let him go!"

You can imagine that life in this Bethany household would never be the same again. Once Lazarus got rid of the funeral cloth and took a shower he was out witnessing about the glory of Christ. His faith was so great and his witness so powerful that the Pharisees plotted to kill him because he was now too much a threat to the status quo. In fact Jesus was now a major threat to Pharisees and they plot to kill him and this leads right into Palm Sunday and the Passion Week.

We read that Mary was also transformed. When Jesus comes back to the house to stay, she somehow sensed the suffering that was in store for him so she took a pound of the most costly perfume and anointed his feet and then wiped them with her hair. She responded with her heart and compassion with an extravagant act of love and faith.

As for Martha, there is only one short reference. When everyone came back to the house again she returns to her role of hostess serving in the kitchen. But I believe in my heart she was not complaining or grumbling like she was in the past. This time she was filled with joy as she knew beyond a doubt she was hosting the Son of God. I also believe that if Jesus were to pull both sisters aside, like he did in the story in Luke, he would have probably said to Martha, "You have chosen the better thing." For she chose her beliefs. She chose to acknowledge that Jesus was the Son of God. She chose eternal life right now! She chose to think outside the grave.

Can you think outside the grave? Can you let go of the practical and logical and claim what Christ has to offer right now?

Does the grave still hold you in some way? Are you still bound by worry, fear, or doubt?

Does the grave still make you stink? Are there still resentments, angers, or desires to get even that still bind your heart?

Hear the words of our Lord, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will have eternal life NOW! Do you believe?"