

This Is What Resurrection Looks Like
John 11:17-27

The passage you just heard from the Gospel of John is one you have probably heard many times before. I have preached from it many times, usually at memorial services, when people come waiting and needing to hear words of comfort. “I am the resurrection and the life...Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

I have noticed before that Jesus ends that little speech with a question to Martha, Lazarus’ sister. He says, “Do you believe this?” as though what she believes, *whether* Martha believes his words, matters—to her life, and to what will happen next. But this time, as I read this paragraph in the Bible, I noticed something different. Maybe you have noticed this before. It’s Martha’s *answer* to that question. Jesus asks her, “Do you believe what I just told you, about resurrection and living, and this promise that if you live in me you will never die?” And Martha says (I’m quoting): “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the son of God, the one coming into the world.” Which—excuse me—is a complete non-sequitur. That is not what he asked her. He didn’t ask her if she believed he was the Messiah; he asked her if she believed that her brother was alive, even though Lazarus seemed pretty dead to her. And she answered Jesus by avoiding the question altogether.

I want to be bold enough this morning to imagine the possibility that Martha detoured around Jesus’ question to her because she really didn’t know what he was talking about. I think maybe she wanted to find a way to say to him, “Yes I believe,” without saying what she *really* thought, which was “Believe what? How can you say that you can make people not die? I don’t want to hear empty, spiritual-sounding promises. My brother is lying over there in a tomb, because you weren’t here to heal him.”

The rest of this story (which we’re not reading this morning because it’s pretty long for a story in the Gospels) is that Jesus too is broken-hearted about his friend Lazarus’ death. And in fact, he *is* able to bring that four-day-dead body back to life. He calls Lazarus out of the tomb, alive again. Some Biblical historians believe that this was the miracle that sealed Jesus’ fate; that it was when he did this final, sort of ultimately-powerful miracle that the religious and political power brokers began in earnest to work toward executing him, before he upset the order of things any further.

What I want to focus on today is Martha’s response to Jesus...and even more, what Martha didn’t say, but maybe wished she could, which was, “You know this resurrection thing you’re talking about? I don’t really get it. I’m listening, and I’m trying—I want to believe you—but I don’t really know what you’re talking about.” And if the entire truth were told, isn’t that how many of us feel about the things we hear in church, the things we’re asked to believe? We want to; we’re willing; but it’s stuff that’s hard to get our minds around. And then, over time, it gets too hard to admit that you don’t understand, because look at all these people sitting around you every Sunday. They seem to get it...don’t they?

Resurrection, I think, is right at the top of that list of things that’s hard to absorb in any of the ways we are used to thinking. Every Easter we get all dressed up and celebrate Jesus’ resurrection; we nod and smile and sing about its meaning; we take it on faith that this is good news for after we die. Maybe we even leave church inspired to go out and start ourselves a new

life. But I'll assume you sometimes wonder the same thing I do: Is that really what the promise of resurrection is about? Am I getting what I'm supposed to out of this story?

If you have asked that for yourself, then Martha's evasiveness in response to Jesus and this sermon today ought to give you lots of comfort. You are not alone.

If these stories of resurrection cause your rational and scientific mind to stand up and say, "I can't go there; I just can't believe that a human body—Jesus' or anyone else's—could come back to life after being dead," then I want say to you: that's fine. It doesn't matter. I don't know whether Jesus', or Lazarus', post-death body actually had brain function and blood flow either.

What I do know is that these stories of resurrection are deeply true because they're a *metaphor* for our lives. I say metaphor not to suggest that you ought to be satisfied with a belief in things that are less than fully true. What it means to speak of resurrection, or any biblical story, as metaphor is to say that it is *so true* that whether it happened once is less important than the fact that it happens over and over again. In this life. To us.

It is profoundly true—I know it—that every death gives way to new life. What Jesus wanted Martha to hear when he said, "I am the resurrection and life," was "Watch me." Watch me and see that God can do something that you have not even dared to hope for, something that doesn't even make sense when you say it out loud. God uses death, these stories tell us—all death—as a vehicle for bringing new life and new hope into the world. I don't mean just the lovely natural deaths, like daffodil bulbs and caterpillar cocoons. I mean *every* death. The unfair ones; the violent ones; the tragic deaths we can never explain. And not only physical, end-of-life death, but all those little deaths that happen while we are still alive: disappointments, broken relationships, blows to our ego. Illness that leaves us less than we once were.

Let me tell you a story about resurrection. I have a friend whose husband died of cancer a little over five years ago. It should never have happened. He was young—barely 50 when he died; he had a great career; he was doing work that helped a lot of people. They had two children, who were way too young to lose their father. As you might expect, my friend was broken by her loss, crushed by the finality of it. I watched her; she did not smile for months. She went back to work and went through the motions of her life. Her friends gathered around her and invited her to be with them as often as they could, to try to remind her of good times. She went and tried to enjoy herself, but she couldn't. She couldn't. It was her husband's body that was dead; but her soul, her picture of her own life, had died with him.

About a year after her husband's death, she got a postcard in the mail, addressed to *him* actually, a mass mailing, inviting people over 50 to a presentation on the Peace Corps, as an option for baby boomers reaching early retirement age. My friend went to that presentation at the Danville library, found it interesting, and put the information aside. A good idea, she thought, but it's for someone else. My life is full already—of mourning, of remembering, of trying to hold on to pieces of this life we had together.

That was in 2007, and in the four years since then, you could see my friend begin to come alive, a little bit at a time. She began to get involved with her church again, to reach out to others. She went on a mission trip to Guatemala. She went back to those papers she put aside from the presentation at the library, and she began to imagine *herself* doing something risky—something life-giving, life-filling.

You know this person. My friend is Alice Impraim, and next week she leaves for a two-year Peace Corps assignment in Namibia, in the southern part of Africa. She can do this because she's alive again. And in her resurrection, she is free. Free enough to take her eyes off of her

own sorrow and turn her vision outward. I asked Alice if there was a moment when she knew she was alive again after Chaka's death. "It happened gradually," she said; a little bit at a time. That's how resurrection happens, I think. Gradually, a glimpse of light, followed by another and another.

"Do you believe this?" Jesus asks. I do. I've never seen anyone walk fully upright out of a tomb, but I have seen people make their way toward new life. Maybe a little bent over by the weight of their loss; maybe stumbling a little at first, maybe turning their head aside and looking the other way when the light seems too bright; but finally fully alive—resurrected, you might say.

This is what God does; it's God's way in the world; it is God's way of creating—to bring life out of what has died. It is possible for all of us. All it takes is loosening our grip and letting go of those things that are death to us: anger, disappointment, pride, resentment, our stubborn insistence on knowing the way things *should* have happened.

Experiencing our own resurrection is absolutely necessary if we are going to make any sense of the kind of life that Ron has been talking about in his sermons on the Social Principles these last few weeks. If we are going to live lives that make us available to un-self-consciously participate in repairing the world, then we have to find a way to live free of our little deaths—the losses and discouragements that can otherwise consume us.

Let me tell you one more little story about how resurrection happens. It comes from a book called *Mortal Lessons*, written by Richard Selzer, who's a surgeon. In this one passage, the surgeon says,

"I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be like this from now on... To remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem... isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks.

"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.

"Yes, I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut."

She nods, and is silent. But the young man smiles.

"I like it, he says. "It's kind of cute."

Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth. I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show that their kiss still works."ⁱ

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This is what resurrection looks like. It *comes* to you, because it's not our work; it's God's. It's not about pulling yourself up by your bootstraps or mustering up all your strength of will to overcome the misfortunes of your life. It's about accepting the scars and misshapen places that all those little deaths leave behind, letting them show; trusting that in one form or another, love will come to you, just as you are, to draw you out into new life. This is who God is; this is what God does.

Do you believe it?

ⁱ Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1974; quoted in Ted Loder, *The Haunt of Grace*, Innisfree Press, Inc., 2002, p. 107-8.