



Sermon, July 24, 2016
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: "Come Meet Jesus"
"Unwrapping Death"

Scripture Reading

John 11:1-16

11:1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. **2** Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. **3** So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." **4** But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." **5** Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, **6** after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. **7** Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." **8** The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" **9** Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. **10** But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." **11** After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." **12** The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." **13** Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. **14** Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. **15** For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." **16** Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Reflection "What does it mean to die with Jesus?"

(Invite comments from the Congregation)

What does it mean to "die with him?" Thomas says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." My mistake in asking the question above is that I thought Thomas refers to Jesus dying in Jerusalem, but the actual antecedent is Lazarus.

So "dying with him" is interesting in that Jesus speaks at various layers of meaning and expression, speaking of sleeping while actually meaning dying (physically), and Thomas speaks of going to Bethany and "dying with him" while not meaning physical death, one presumes. What kind of

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death might he mean? Perhaps this is a foreshadowing of what Jesus will declare to Martha that he is the resurrection and the life and that anyone who lives and believes in him, though they die, yet shall they live. Here Jesus again plays with levels of meaning and significance. Continually throughout the Gospels Jesus speaks of dying to things in order to live, and in John there are continuous references to Jesus revealing a deeper dimension to life that is the way of heaven, not the way of human systems of power, thought, or behavior. This is the life that comes from the Eternal One, the life that does not die. Of course, this is referring to a consciousness that is greater than that conformed to mundane ways of operating. Or more to the point, conformed to a system of death. The passages that complete this chapter give an example of the system of death that rules human affairs: those threatened by his teaching meet and plot how to kill him. This is the sort of “Final Solution” type of thinking that Jesus has come “into the world” to overturn.

Scripture Reading

John 11:17-27

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. **18** Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, **19** and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. **21** Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22** But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” **23** Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” **24** Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” **25** Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, **26** and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” **27** She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Reflection “What does Jesus mean that those who live and believe
in him will never die?”

Pastor Craig

As a pastor, one of the greatest and most agonizing privileges I have is doing funerals. At a funeral we take the time out of our busy workaday schedules to ponder, however briefly, these mysteries of life and death. Here is a person, now dead, who once lived a life, walked and talked, ate, slept, loved, hated, made things, destroyed things, made a mark of some sort upon the world. As preacher, I am to acknowledge their life, and to witness to the mystery of death, and to contemplate life beyond that death. I know for myself I am much more comfortable speaking

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about a person’s life. If I was fortunate enough to have known them in the flesh, I can speak about what I witnessed, about things I saw and heard with my own eyes and ears. But I have not been beyond death, and it is hard for me to describe that which I have not seen and heard, touched and tasted.

But there is another aspect to this agony and privilege of preaching at funerals. On the one hand, there are funerals that celebrate a life that was lived with energy, intensity, eccentricity and aplomb. But what will I do at the funeral of someone whose life seemed to be spent more in death than in life? What can I say about someone whose life was more characterized by death than by life? What can I say to those of us still living about the death of a person who didn’t seem to know how to live?

This story about Lazarus is precisely about this very question. The way I read this story, it isn’t really about life after death, or eternal life, or about what happens to us after we die. Those themes are reserved for the story of Easter. In that story, the story still to come, Jesus passes through death, conquers it, and rises again in a glorified body to show us that death is a doorway, not a dead end. But the story of Lazarus is not like this. Lazarus does not pass completely through that doorway. Rather he seems to stop midway, and then returns in the same exact body in which he tried to depart from this world. Lazarus doesn’t even speak in this story. He has no witness to make of what he saw, of what lay beyond the portals of this world.

No, the story’s focus is upon Jesus. The focus of the story is nestled right in the middle when Jesus says to Martha (and to us) “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will come to life, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” Notice, he doesn’t say, I will be the resurrection and the life, he says I *am* the resurrection. Patricia deJong says this about this story: “Just as John the Gospel writer would have us believe about another kind of water and a different way of seeing, so now he would have us comprehend another kind of life. In this text, John dares to assert that

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there is a greater marvel than coming back from the dead. It is the life, resurrected life of the baptized, that you and I are asked to live now.”

“This is not a story about life after death. This is a story about life and death. Life as this life. Death as part of life. Not life later, but life now, life in this life, the resurrected life in our own living. It is the life of our baptism, a life of seeing things not as they appear, but as life can be when there is love and hope and belief. We live in a world where there is evil and ugliness, disease, pain, hatred and death. Inasmuch as we buy (into) the world only as it is, we embrace death. ‘Choose life,’ Moses urges the Israelites, and us. ‘Live that life which is life indeed,’ Paul instructs us.”¹

SCRIPTURE READING

John 11:28-44

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” **29** And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. **30** Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. **31** The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. **32** When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” **33** When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. **34** He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” **35** Jesus began to weep. **36** So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” **37** But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” **38** Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. **39** Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” **40** Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” **41** So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” **43** When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” **44** The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

REFLECTION “What are the forces of death in our community and world that we can work together to unwrap?”

Unbind yourself. Jesus calls Lazarus forth back into life, and Lazarus steps out into the light, still bound and wrapped with the trappings of death. What a marvelous image for us! Jesus can give us new life, can

¹ Patricia deJong, “Unbind Him”, preached March 24, 1996.

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call us back from whatever patterns of death we may get ourselves into, but how often do we still wander around bound to the old ways, wrapped up in our old ways of thinking and acting, tied to our anger and resentments, attached to our prejudices, lashed to our stubbornness, fastened to our hard-heartedness? Part of the job of the community of believers is to unbind one another from whatever it is that is keeping us bound to death, bound to the old life, fettered and shackled to attitudes, behaviors and mindsets that do not reflect the mind of Christ at work within us. “Unbind him,” Jesus says to the crowd. “Unbind one another,” is what He says to us.

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection...” He did not say I *will be* the resurrection, or the resurrection will come if you believe; he simply said, *I am* the resurrection, I am life now, here today. That life is available to you now. That life which is lived as hope in the face of everything that would rob you of hope is available right now. That life which dances when the world would forbid it, that life which sings when the world would try to reduce you to wailing, is available right now. The one who stood and called out “Lazarus come forth!” stands right now at the doorway to the tombs of our lives, and calls out our names. “(...), come forth! Come out of death into life! Unbind yourself from whatever it is holding you in the clutches of death. Come forth! Come into life!”