

April 16 - Easter I Am the Resurrection

John 20:1-18

We read again the great story of that first Easter morning and how Jesus broke the bonds of death and rose again. His encounter with Mary Magdalene changes her life and all of creation forever. Today I want us to go back in time a bit to the story of Lazarus. During Lent we have been examining the great “I AM” statements of Jesus. In them we have learned more about who Jesus was, about God, and our relationship to God in Christ. Today, fittingly we end with the greatest of his “I AM” statements where Jesus shares, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

We have learned that context is everything when examining these “I AM” statements so let us hear again Lazarus’ story. He was a friend of Jesus who lived in Bethany, a town near Jerusalem. He had two sisters, Mary, not the one who encountered Jesus at the tomb, and Martha. Jesus had often stayed with them. Lazarus had fallen ill and his sisters had sent word to Jesus. Jesus, with his disciples, turns towards Bethany. We read: “*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.*”

Jesus didn’t arrive in time to cure Lazarus. He had died four days earlier. His death was a major blow to the sisters. Not only had they lost their brother, but in that culture they had lost the man who protected them. Women had no rights and often could not own property. His death would leave them in very uncertain times.

²¹Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ Have you ever said those words to God?

“Lord if you had just been here....”

...things would be different

...this accident would not have happened.

...this injustice would not have occurred.

...I would still have my job.

...the car would not have skidded off the road.

There is no end to the reasons for saying, "Lord, if you had been here..." Those words share the reality of the uncertainties of life. We want to believe that if we have enough faith we will be protected from some of these tumultuous times. The story of Lazarus is a reminder that while life events happen even to those of faith, God is faithfully with us. Martha says: *"²²But 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.'"*

Now where did Martha get the idea of resurrection? This is weeks before Easter. The idea of resurrection did not start with Jesus. It already existed in Judaism. We see it as far back as the book of Daniel. In chapter 12:2 we hear: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life." Martha could have added to her statement about the resurrection, "Belief is well and good but that is not much help right now!" Then Jesus says something so startling:

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?'* ⁷*She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'* We tend to read these words in light of the events of Easter but that is still in the future. Jesus was saying, belief in me makes a difference right now. I can help with the pain of loss that you are feeling. Do you believe? The word translated "believe" also means trust. Hear these words with that translation. *"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who trust in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and trusts in me will never die. Do you trust this? She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I trust."* There is a difference between believing and trusting. The great goal of the spiritual life is not only to believe in God but to believe God. It is a trust issue.

Our own resistance can hold us back from experiencing God's possibility. We want to hold onto the old. We are still in the, "Lord if only you had been here." At some point there has to be an acceptance of the new reality, no matter how unwanted it may

be. Only then can we be open to what God has next for us. Jesus knew what he was going to do, but first he wanted Martha to accept life now, trusting Jesus with her would make a difference. Her saying, "Yes Lord, I trust" allowed her to look forwards not backwards.

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.' ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.... ³²When 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.'

Mary has the same complaint. She was saying Jesus, I needed you to fix this and you didn't!

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁷But 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. ³⁹Jesus 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 for four days.' ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.' ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴The 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.'

Lazarus finds new life. Martha and Mary get their brother back. This is not a story of resurrection but a story of resuscitation. Lazarus will again die. Mary and Martha, if they out live him, will again experience grief. People often talk of resurrection when they

mean resuscitation. Resuscitation means bringing back to life—returning life to the way it was. Resurrection means a whole new life, a different life.

Most of the time we want resuscitation. We want God to restore a relationship. We want God to make a spouse return. We want a job back, an old life back, something back the way it was. It is like the joke about what happens when you play a country song in reverse. You get your car back, your wife back, your house back and so forth. We crave resuscitation while God promises transformation. God promises resurrection.

Think about how often we long for God to come in and fix the past. If only you had been here... Perhaps even now you can reset the clock. Jesus didn't say, "I can give you resurrection and Lazarus' life back." He said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." He is new life. We find it in him. But to find that new life we have to accept the realities of today. Resurrection, the miracle of new possibilities, doesn't occur without death. Easter occurs not in spite of death but because of it. Our Christian faith offers hope because it faces death squarely and moves through it, not around it. It means pain, disappointment, and heartache are not final realities. Death takes away. Death forever changes things. That is what death does. But here is what death cannot do. Death cannot give us a future. Death cannot create. Death cannot do a new thing. Only the Great I AM can do that.

The focus on the story of Lazarus was on Martha and Mary not on him. It is a story for those facing death about the possibility of life. But for this to happen we have to trust in the one who brings that gift to us.

The story in the garden that first Easter is focused on another Mary. She too was focused on the past, grieved that God had not intervened. When Jesus first appears she thinks him to be the gardener. She asks for the body. Only after saying her name does she become aware of Jesus alive. Even then he says, "Don't hold on to me but go and tell." Belief in the power of new life and transformation is not about holding on but moving forward, sharing the good news. You can hear it in her words to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

In closing let me share a resurrection story. They had been best friends since they were little. They had always lived in the same community and did everything together. They were in each other's weddings and were enjoying raising their children together. Then one of their husbands got a job in another state. They were moving. The one moving started getting excited about all the new things happening in her life, a new home, job and all. The one remaining was in grief. She was only thinking about how awful her life was going to be without her friend. The move happened and the one remaining moped around. She was praying for resuscitation. She admitted that she prayed that her friend's husband's job would fall through and they would have to move back home. She so desperately wanted what she had that she could not celebrate what her friend was experiencing or believe that new life awaited her. She finally admitted all of this to her husband and they to their pastor. The pastor asked the woman, do you trust me enough to help you? Warily she said yes. The pastor said, "Since you have so much free time now that you are not spending it with your best friend, I want you to help me with the confirmation class." The woman was filled with all the reasons she should say no. But she had said she trusted her pastor and so agreed. Through that program she met other moms. She was an outgoing and caring person. Soon she was providing rides, organizing play dates, going out on family picnics with other families. Looking back over a period of a year she was amazed at how many new friends she had. She now understood that her longtime friendship had blocked her from other friendships. She found a new and enriched life.

We don't like to hear the message that death happens. We want God to fix things. We want resuscitation. But Jesus doesn't offer us these choices. What he does say is that "I am the resurrection." Through him we find hope and possibilities. In the midst of death we can find new beginnings. When life seems over or something we have enjoyed has ended we are to hear that God is creating something new. Jesus asks us, as he did Martha: "Are you willing to trust in me?" I hope the answer you give is yes. I am betting my life now and forever on Jesus who continually brings me life. Jesus is my Resurrection and he gives me life!