

I AM the Resurrection and the Life  
John 11:1, 17-27  
Psalm 130

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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John 11:1, 17-27

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Martha steps out into the road to confront him. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

At first glance, it would appear that the lady has a point. Her brother Lazarus spent some time dying, and Martha and her sister Mary sent messengers to Jesus. Those messengers had reached Jesus, and he had chosen to delay for two days before leaving where he was and coming to see his friends.<sup>1</sup>

Martha knows that Jesus has power. Her whole family have been among Jesus’ followers for some time now. They have witnessed miracles.

Jesus had previously stayed in the home of these siblings. You may remember, the story of the contrast between the sisters Mary and Martha? Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet, Martha being the busy hostess?<sup>2</sup> This is that Martha. And it appears from where she’s standing that Jesus has ignored her need and her call for his help. It appears that he has ignored her, and her life is ruined.

You see, in addition to her natural grief at losing her brother, Martha lives in a world where, as a woman, she is, by our modern standards, incredibly vulnerable. Despite being a very capable woman, she cannot just go get a job to support herself. There are no respectable jobs available for a woman. She does not have the right to own property.

With no husband and no brother, she and her sister will become the legal responsibility and, effectively, the legal property, of, essentially, the nearest surviving male relative willing to take on responsibility for them. *He* will decide where they live. *He* will decide what to do with their house, their land, their livestock. *His* house, *his* land, *his* livestock. This nearest surviving

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<sup>1</sup> John 11. We will leave aside the point that he only delayed two days, and he then arrived four days after Lazarus was dead. Martha is not taking that into account.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10.

male relative might be someone who detests the sisters, and vice versa. Or, depending on how the family is doing, he might be such a distant relative that they have never even met. Mary and Martha's entire lives are in limbo here, and all because of something that Jesus could have prevented with a wave of his hand, had he been there.

So, if Martha were to feel like Jesus let her down, I can understand that. If Martha were to feel like Jesus ignored her when she needed him, I can understand that. If she were to be hurt and angry with Jesus, and want to confront him, I can understand that, too. I suspect that most of us have felt that way toward him at one time or another, whether we admit it or not.

And Martha does confront Jesus. She speaks to him quite sharply and calls him to account.

Let her serve as an example for us. She is mad at Jesus, and she does not say, "Oh, I can't say that to him." She says it. The Psalms show us that, for millennia, people have been saying harsh things to God. They have exposed their raw emotions to God in ways that would make most of us blanch.

Let me tell you a secret: God can take it. Anything you want to say to God, God has heard worse. So, say what you want to say to God.

But then follow the rest of Martha's example.

Because she doesn't just yell at Jesus.

She goes on.

"But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Martha yells at Jesus, but she has not given up faith in him.

She still comes to Jesus for what she needs.

She still believes in Jesus.

That word, “believe.” Unfortunately, the word “believe” is a faint echo of the Greek word *pisteuo*, that’s being translated here. This goes far beyond intellectual belief. A belief is a proposition about which someone could change your mind, if they had the right evidence. This is not a head thing at all. You don’t have to be a scholar to *pisteuo*. You have to have faith, like the faith of a child. This is heart and gut stuff.

Martha has confidence in Jesus. But this goes beyond that.

Martha trusts Jesus. She trusts Jesus with her soul, with her very self, with who she is. She has entrusted herself to him, body and soul, with nothing held back.

This is the same verb we find in John 3:16, incidentally. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” So that everyone who entrusts themselves to him, completely, with nothing held back, may not perish, but have eternal life.

Jesus says to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.”

Jesus knows what Martha wants from him, and he tells her that she will have it.

She responds, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

John Calvin describes Martha in this scene as being spiritually timid.<sup>3</sup> She is holding on to what she knows and talking about things that will happen at the end of the world, instead of truly listening to what Jesus is saying about right now. It’s easy to talk about things that will

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: The Gospel According to St. John*. Commentary on v.24.

happen at the end of the world, isn't it? It doesn't require any change in what you expect right now, or in what you do right now.

Jesus knows that Martha is being timid. But he loves her.

Jesus tells her, "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."

Jesus is not talking about glorious things that will happen at the end of the world. Those are real, and they will happen. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus is talking about how to live in the nitty-gritty real world that we are experiencing right now. This entire story does not take place once upon a time, or long, long ago in a Galilee far, far away.<sup>4</sup> It is firmly grounded in reality. Bethany is a specific village. It is named and its location is described. The day is roughly specified, four days after Lazarus' death. Mary and Martha and Lazarus are specific named people, not generic villagers. There is a crowd of witnesses who show up later, on Palm Sunday, in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, and he does, about fifteen verses after the passage that Sheridan read this morning, the story is not mostly about Jesus' power in the world. Though that power is real.

The story is not even mostly about Jesus' being willing to intervene in the lives of individual people whom he loves. Though he is. And he calls Mary and Martha's lives back out of limbo just as surely as he calls Lazarus from the grave.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Star Wars* reference is intentional.

<sup>5</sup> John 12:17-18.

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. This is a sign of the power of a resurrected life that can begin now, for everyone who is willing to entrust themselves to him.

Jesus is changing the rules of existence. No longer is life a tomb with a big rock blocking the exit. The shadow of death that has poisoned and stunted human existence ever since the Garden of Eden is not the ultimate reality.

In Jesus, the bonds of death are snapped like toothpicks and human existence is restored to life. The triumph of resurrected life is already happening, right now. Jesus makes possible abundant life, so abundant that it can overcome even death in the present.

This Lenten season, we have looked at the statements that Jesus made about himself.

He is the Bread of Life, the way for us to get abundant life and the way that we are sustained in that life.

He is the Light of the World, the light that lets us see the beautiful image of God in all our sisters and brothers.

He is the Door, the way to relationship with God.

He is the Good Shepherd, who walks with us through all the bad things that happen in our lives, even the valley of the shadow of death.

He is the Resurrection and the Life.

What does this mean for us?

It means, look around, and see what can only be seen by the Light of the World. See that even your enemies are your brothers and sisters. Disrupt their entire world, and love them.

It means, when your life is hard, go ahead and yell at God, but then ask him for what you need. For the Good Shepherd will always be walking with you.

It means, entrust yourself, everything you have and everything you are, fully to Jesus. Not just as an intellectual exercise, but completely.

It means, live fully into that abundant life that Jesus came to Earth to bring us.

AMEN.