

I Am the Resurrection And the Life
John 11:17-27
April 17, 2011
Rev. John Burns
University Baptist Church ~ College Park, MD 20740
Website: www.weareubc.org

Most of the time, I prefer the conjunction "and" over "or." At Thanksgiving I don't like to be asked, "Do you want pecan or pumpkin pie?" I am happier with the question, "Would you like a slice of pecan and one of pumpkin?" I favor hugs and kisses, not hugs or kisses. Peanut butter and jelly, not one or the other. Health insurance and paid vacation not a choice between the two benefits. It seems far more gallant to take Karen out to dinner and a movie than it does to invite her to dinner or a movie.

When Martha's brother Lazarus died, she reasonably concluded that Jesus could give her one gift but not another. As Lazarus's sickness grew more severe, she and her sister Mary sent for Jesus to come and heal their brother. They asked Jesus to hurry to Lazarus' bedside and give him life, but Jesus didn't respond as they had hoped. Instead, Christ waited a few days so that by the time he reached Bethany, Lazarus had been dead four days. Upon his arrival, both sisters greeted Jesus with the indictment, "Lord if you would have been here my brother would not have died." But Lazarus was dead, and both women believed it was too late for Jesus to help their brother in this world.

Martha revealed this assumption when she told Jesus, "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." To which Jesus replied, "Your brother will rise again." Rather than say, "Praise God, make him live again oh Lord" however, she said, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." In other words, Martha concluded that Lazarus couldn't have life here and in heaven. She believed it was either/or. Since Jesus didn't show up when called, they were left with only the alternative of the afterlife.

But Jesus surprises her. He says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." With words that seem almost too good to be true, Jesus says, the appropriate conjunction here is "and" not "or." "I am the resurrection and the life."

The entirety of discipleship would have been altered had Jesus said, "I am the resurrection or the life." Had Christ stated, "you can have heaven when you die or my love and abiding presence with you now, but you can't have both" we would have faced a disturbing quandary. I suppose most of us would have chosen heaven and taken our chances getting through this life alone, but thanks be to God, Jesus did not force such a horrific decision upon us. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life." In other words, through faith and trust in Christ, we find abundant life here and now, and everlasting life in the world to come. The legendary gospel singer Andre Crouch sang "If heaven was never promised to me, never God's promise to live eternally; its been worth it just having the Lord in my life." I like that sentiment, but Jesus promised that we can have "both/and" not "either/or."

As in all the great promises issued by Christ, however, we have to ask what He means when he says he is the resurrection and the life. Since, two weeks ago, the sermon was on eternal life, and since odds are good that we will speak about that again next week on Easter Sunday, let's focus on what Jesus meant when he said he was the resurrection **and the life**. What does Jesus mean when he promises to give us life right now?

Well whatever he had in mind, he did not intend to promise that we would never have to experience, sorrow, loss, pain or disappointment. The heart of this story about Lazarus and his grieving sisters deals with the disappointment we often feel with Christ's responses to our many life crisis. For in this story, two women send for Jesus with full confidence that he can keep their beloved brother from dying and Jesus does not respond as they had hoped.

If you are a person of prayer and faith, you've experienced this same disappointment. Maybe you've been lucky enough to be spared the worst kinds of losses in life, but whether you've suffered major blows or minor setbacks, you've no doubt had some occasion in which you called out to Christ to do something, a good something, a helpful, healing, happy something, but Jesus did not respond as you requested. I'm not talking about asking God to give your exhusband scabies or make your boss' teeth fall out. I'm referring to prayers for healing, help and happiness that seem to go unanswered.

When that happens, we wonder why? As John tells this story, he rules out several popular answers. One prominent answer is that unanswered prayer means God either didn't hear or understand our prayers. Right from the beginning, however, John tells us Jesus definitely heard the sisters' request to help their brother and understood the severity of the need. When the disciples asked Jesus why they must risk their lives by returning to Bethany if Lazarus was only sick, Jesus replied, "he is sleeping." Then he added for clarification, "Lazarus is dead." When we pray and don't get the response we most want, we might question whether Jesus even heard us so John makes the truth plain, Jesus heard and understood. He just didn't respond as the sisters hoped.

So why didn't he respond? When the Lord does not intervene and give us the good response we desire, we are often tempted to believe that our love and devotion toward God must not be strong enough to get the Lord to do as we ask. Our prayers are denied, we often conclude, because we aren't good enough, have enough faith, aren't devoted enough to God. John combats this notion when he identifies one of the sisters who sends for Jesus as Mary and then adds, "Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair."

John is doing more than simply identifying Mary here. If that was his purpose, he would have referred to her as "Mary who sat at Jesus' feet while her sister Martha fussed about dinner." That's the story we associate most clearly with this Mary. Instead, John tells us this was the woman whose gratitude and devotion to Christ was so great she doused his feet with expensive perfume and dried them with her own hair; an act of love and reverence so great that Jesus promised it would be told throughout the world wherever the gospel was preached. And it must have been, because John refers to this story before he tells us the story. He doesn't describe the details of Mary's sacrificial act until chapter twelve of his gospel. Lazarus' raising is found in chapter eleven. This means that the story was so well known, John didn't have to tell it, he only had to reference it. Everyone knew the story of this wondrous act of love, they just didn't know the name of the woman who offered the superior devotion. John reported that the woman whose act of love was known throughout the church was the very same Mary who asked Jesus to come and heal her brother. He's letting us know that we can't blame Jesus' failure to respond on Mary or Martha's lack of faith, they excelled in their love for Christ.

As the story unfolds, John also rules out another possible explanation for Jesus' seeming tardiness. When our prayers seem ineffective, we often decide that God doesn't love us enough to provide the assistance we desire. That troubling thought is behind the statement made by Mary and Martha's friends who came to comfort them at Lazarus' death. John says many asked, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" The implication is that surely Jesus could have, so why didn't he? Did he not care enough to be bothered with the request?

Again, John dismisses this explanation. At the beginning of this story, Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Two verses later, John tells us, "Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was."

Then, when Jesus finally visited the home of Lazarus and witnessed the tears and grief of the dead man's family and friends and recognized all the pain that accompanies the death of people precious to us, he wept. When friends and neighbors noticed his outpouring of emotion they exclaimed, "See how Jesus loved this man." Christ's love for Lazarus, Mary and Martha was not the problem in this story.

If Christ heard and understood the request and saw the true, deep devotion of Mary and Martha and loved them, as well as their brother with all his heart, why didn't Jesus give the sisters the good thing they wanted?

Maybe he didn't have the power to help Lazarus? Isn't that what we are left with? If he heard of the need, recognized the faith of those petitioning him and loved them enough to help, then, logic suggests, he must not have had the power to make Lazarus well. Of course if you know the ending to this story, you know that power is not the problem. So what is going on here?

The gospel of John was the last gospel completed. Although we don't know the date for sure, our best guess is that it moved from an oral to printed form until about seventy years after the crucifixion. By then Christians were struggling with the difficulty of faith. Persecution, from both Jewish and Roman authorities was intensifying. Life as a believer was hard. Matthew, Mark and Luke, who all wrote earlier in history, pointed out that discipleship was demanding and often ended in death, however, they encouraged believers to stay faithful and even rejoice for after death, they promised, the disciples would rise again to live eternally with God. Jesus was the resurrection, they preached.

In the book of Revelation, John conveys a similar message but in his gospel, he felt the need to bring out a fuller understanding of what Christ offered. Yes, he acknowledged, Christians would resurrect to eternal life by the power of God, but there was more good news to add to that joyful proclamation. Jesus could give us life, abundant, free, joyful and meaningful right now. Jesus has the power to give "resurrection and life" John proclaimed.

Jesus did not heal Lazarus before his death, but it was not because he didn't have the power. He did not heal Lazarus because God wanted Him to do something else, something with even wider implications for the world than the healing of a sick man. First century believers needed to see that Christ could give them life right now and God decided to use the death of Lazarus to make that plain.

Under the leadership of God, Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus and told his friends and family to remove the stone that held him inside. Martha, ever the practical one, objected and said Lord, its been four days, his body is decaying. She's saying, there is no chance for life now Lord, keep him sealed up and raise him in the future.

But that's not God's plan for that day. Jesus persisted and the stone was rolled away. Then Christ called out to God to hear him and added to God, "I knew you heard me, I just wanted the people around me to know you heard me." That's John's way of letting us know that what is about to happen is not for Jesus or even Lazarus alone, but for all those watching at the time and for all of us reading the text this morning. Next, Christ, in a loud voice, calls out the name of Lazarus.

At this point, I'd like to shift the camera angle on this story. Up to know, the focus has been on Jesus, outside the tomb. Now, lets move the camera to wherever Lazarus is and film his response. Where is Lazarus? He's been dead four days, where is he when Jesus calls? Since I don't believe in purgatory or that there is a waiting room outside of heaven where all the dead sit until God lets them in, I have to believe Lazarus was already in heaven or, at the very least, standing on the threshold. Lazarus was mere feet away from walking through the pearly gates to spend eternity with the angels, saints and God Almighty, when he heard his name called.

Remember when you were a kid and were just about to slip out of the house to go to a friend's house or the ball fields or the swimming pool and your mother or father called your name? "John, John, get back here and empty the trash. Come back here and clean your room. You're not leaving until you help do these dishes." You were almost free and then they called you back to fulfill a responsibility.

So it was with Lazarus, he is almost into his eternal home when God calls him back. "Lazarus, Lazarus, come on back, I've got something more I want you to do." Remember Lazarus has already died once. He's

experienced the pain, fear, and sadness of letting go and now he's got to come back into his earthly journey and deal with all the challenges of his life, plus go through death again. What would you do, if Jesus called your name in similar circumstances?

That's the point. Jesus is calling Lazarus to trust him not only to give him eternal life, but life abundant in this world. He is saying, "Turn loose of what you've almost claimed Lazarus, come back and I will give you a meaningful, joyful, peace-filled life among your family and friends on earth. I am the resurrection and the life, Lazarus, do you trust me enough to obey my voice and come into all that I have planned for you?"

Jesus told his disciples on a previous day that his sheep knew his voice. Lazarus proves he is one of the Lord's sheep, for when the call comes to him, he walks back through the darkness of that tomb and into life. Wrapped in the linens of death, he could barely move until Jesus commanded Lazarus' family and friends to unbind him and let him go. They do and Lazarus lived, not in heaven, that day will yet arrive, he lived in the here and now.

The poet Rainer Marie Rilke wrote, "No one lives his life. Disguised since childhood, haphazardly assembled from voices and fears and little pleasures, we come of age as masks. Our true face never speaks. Somewhere there must be storehouses where all the lives are laid away like suits of armor or old carriages or clothes hanging limply on the walls. Maybe all paths lead there to the repository of un-lived things. . . something waiting inside them, like an unplayed melody in a flute?"

I've been trying to help people with the spiritual dimension of their lives for 37 years. Through thousands of conversations with hundreds of people I have discovered that folks come to Christ first and foremost to receive eternal life and know they'll go to heaven when they die. Thanks be to God, that matter gets settled pretty quickly. A simple prayer of faith expressing repentance and inviting Christ to come into a person's heart takes care of the issue forevermore. Jesus is the resurrection.

It's the other half of that promise, however, that gets neglected by so many believers, myself included. Lovely people, folks with many wonderful qualities stay tied up, entombed, lifeless. Oh we exist like flutes filled with unplayed melodies. We take in oxygen, breathe out carbon dioxide, grow, replenish cells, do the laundry, cash the checks, hit the alarm clock, pay the bills. But we allow anger, bitterness, greed, fear, pettiness, anxiety, addictions, meanness, selfishness or a hundred other things to rob us of life and act like Jesus doesn't have anything to do with that. Instead of learning the new melodies Christ offers us, we keep playing the same old worn out tunes, refusing to let go of all that is dead in our lives and walk into the new life Christ has for us to live.

We wear our masks, as Rilke says, trying to measure up to our peers, to what t.v., movies and music say we are to be, to whatever our boss wants or our misguided appetites demand or our flawed parents expected. And when life rolls over us and we get smashed flat, we say, "This life is hard, but Jesus is the resurrection and will one day give us heaven." The Lord, who hears all prayers and loves us with an incomprehensible love, replies, "yes, I am the resurrection but I'm also the life. So obey my voice and come forth. Let me remove the anger, the foolishness, the insecurity, the masks and help you live with freedom, joy and peace."

You see this story is really not about whether Jesus is going to respond to our call. That is certain and although we may deem Him tardy, he will be right on God's time. This story is about whether we will respond when Jesus calls us. Calls into the tombs of our existence and says "come forth, lay aside all that binds you and live for I am the resurrection and the life." Amen.