

“Do You Believe this?”

Sermon for 27 August 2017

Texts: Ephesians 2:1-4, Luke 15:11-32 & John 11:25-27a

**“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live, and everyone who believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? And she said to him, “Yes, Lord.””**

We have arrived at Ephesians 2:1-4. Martha’s response to the Lord’s declaration and question, “Yes, Lord,” signifies her faith. She believes in His identity: **I am the resurrection and the life**. By faith in Him, we obtain life, full life, eternal life, real, true and triumphant life. How is this life obtained? It is obtained by saving faith—faith that opens the door to our spiritual core *so that this resurrection and life can infuse our entire being, as it were, from the inside out!*

The occasion and setting for this exchange was the tardy arrival of Jesus, from a limited but authentically human perspective, on the scene of Lazarus’ wake. Lazarus has expired. He has died a physical death, the family is there, the mourners are there (some of whom are professional mourners, paid to raise a ruckus, over the death of a loved one with wailing and loud crying, and the throwing of dust and ashes). Strange to us, but not to the Jewish friends and family of Lazarus. Death is a catastrophe. It is a terrible occurrence—it is painful, difficult, awful. It doesn’t matter if the loss is a fifteen week old baby, or a 93 year old blessed saint, pastor, father and family.

With physical death, the common presence of the corpse, funeral practices, shrouds and tombs and graves are helpful in driving home the harsh reality of human mortality. The body is prepared for burial, laid in the tomb, some words are spoken and some prayers offered up—then the crowd departs, the period of mourning follows but our funeral practices allows for some closure. There are things we do to mark off the stages of grieving, but the tomb is sealed and those activities, serving the needs of the living, typically take place elsewhere.

Now after this exchange with Martha, Jesus moves on to the village. Mary comes out of the house to meet him. The mourners seeing this activity suppose that she is returning to the tomb **to weep there** (11:31) and they sympathetically follow her. It is hard to hear her sad remonstrance, **Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.** (v.32) And she is right, where the Lord is, there is no death! The Lord sees her weeping, and the Jews with her weeping and even **He weeps.** (v.35) But this expression of compassion, is not what Jesus chiefly came to accomplish. No, for prior to His show of human sympathy, it is written: **He was deeply moved in spirit and deeply troubled.** (v.33) These words point to a profounder spiritual state: aware of the intrusive and unwelcome presence of death in the world He created, Jesus is furious. Yes, angry at the evil of death—which He regards as one of our final enemies!—riled up over the sin which introduced death in the first place.

I believe we are familiar with the defeat of death on the cross and the cancellation of the power of the grave through Jesus' resurrection, but here, in a stunning power encounter, Jesus takes on death and defeats death, dispossessing death of its prey—even the recently deceased Lazarus. *That is what Jesus delayed for, that is what He came for.* **Where have you laid him?** I am not quite sure how to take this question. Surely He knew the whereabouts of the tomb so perhaps the implication is more like: take me to the body! He returns to the scene of the internment because that marks the very place from whence Lazarus would rise again. And, praise God, that is exactly what happens.

Ephesians 2:1 reads **And you were dead in trespasses and sins.** Paul plainly does not mean we were dead as Lazarus was dead, stone cold dead. There is a death this side of that. It is the death which accompanies faithless living. It refers to the actual condition of humanity apart from faith in God, or the far side of **I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live, and everyone who believes in me shall never die.** Paul is addressing our actual condition (**dead in trespasses and sins**) and not our possible, or potential condition (**alive in Christ Jesus**). *Which are you, dead, or alive?* When you meet someone, a stranger, someone new, another person for the first time, do you wonder, “Hey, are you dead, or alive? Do you have eternal life . . . or are you still just going through the motions? Are you alive in Christ, or are you the walking dead?” I hope you do not think it odd that I would raise this scenario—I would hope you'd expect nothing less!—because if you have Christ, and you've just come to the party, you could have the opportunity of raising the dead to life.

There are three “lives” we are concerned with here—as reminded by Jesus and Lazarus, and as instigated by the Apostle Paul—there is “life” as activity and consciousness within a bodily frame. Then there is “life” as another natural existence of thinking, loving, willing/choosing, enjoying and sorrowing *and the like*—both these forms of life end when God removes His hand, or withholds your breath. Lazarus' death encompassed both of these cessations. The majority of people around us are causing through their existence, seemingly content to live, or die as one without consent or choice. They appear oblivious to any other, any higher form of life than what they take for granted. There is a third form of “life” which comes from lifting the two former “lives” to the level of a spiritual existence, lived toward God! This “life” adds to the former two, things like trusting and obeying, finding consecration and immortality in Christ alone. Spiritual life is the only life lived according to the will (yet not just that—it is the gift of God), an acceptance of the gracious offer, a choice to believe (or **to live by faith** and not merely by reason and our senses). This life is the true life—the life for which we were originally created and which the enemy of our souls wants to keep from us with all his twisted powers and stratagems. Activity and consciousness, all the attributes of human living point to this third and higher life—they seem to be figures for, or parables of that life with God which Christ came to offer us because of the Father's love.

It is as if God, with observant and pitying love, looks across the cemetery of this world and, because He is rich in mercy, longs to whisper over all the dead

children who inhabit this world, “Live, my children!” It would sound very like, **Lazarus, come forth(!)** would it not? We are in the world as those who are sedated. We are on selfishness, self-will, sensuality and sin—much as self-indulgent addicts are hooked on their substance(s) of choice. *Sin is a lifestyle choice, more than we want to admit.* We act as if we are not alive if we are not on something. Giving it a break, may be the first step to salvation! However, some introspection might be good: if we were videotaped on our highs, or tripping, we would see, for ourselves, how out of it we actually are—truly more dead than alive. Not the life of the party—not even at the party. We may indulge in this sedative, or disavow that one, but what we cannot evade, or deny, is God’s superintending love—His watching over and longing for His children to be set free!

We are all Absalom’s to our heavenly King and death overtakes us, red-handed in treason, just as it overtook David’s darling son. We see how heedless King David was of victory, how oblivious David was to the rebellion that necessitated the strife, division and warfare, doubled over with grief: groaning out his name and relationship, over and over. **Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died**, as grieving Mary cried! Just so, only more so, did our heavenly father grieve and yearn for us, His lost rebellious children! It was His love that brought the sacrifice of Jesus—not the other way around. And if Jesus were not the medium of our true life—by divine decree—He might not have had to die and rise again! ***But it is through Him, and by Him and for Him*** that we have been born-again to a living faith! Because of His great sacrifice, and not merely our bare will, it is through his oblation, *His offering of Himself to God on our behalf!*, that we know eternal life—**Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live, and everyone who believes in me shall never die.**

God is still in the business of raising dead souls to life. And you also, if you are a Christian, are His partner in this everlasting life business. You have eternal life—it is also yours to give away. The life of Christ in me . . . available to all. When His life, by faith, was infused into your core being, His life was that power of a greater affection that drove out all the lesser things—the lesser lusts, the lesser lives (which now, in retrospect, you see for the idolatries they were!) even spiritual death itself! True life comes by trusting Christ—not by way of indulging, or imbibing— when He is all your life, you will settle for nothing less.

**Amen**