

---

# RESURRECTION AND LIFE

JOHN 11:1-145

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL  
ON SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2020 BY THE REV. DR. CAROL GREGG

---

Prayer.

Jesus said: “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? (John 11:25-26)

Actually Jesus, we may be having a hard time with that one. Right now we see a great deal of fear, illness, and death. We are saturated with news about COVID-19, with numbers of cases and exponential graphs seeming to be ever present. Our lives are disrupted, loved ones are losing their jobs, illness is taking its toll, gun sales are increasing, and experts tell us we haven’t seen the worst of it yet. Resurrection and life, where exactly is that?

The story of the raising of Lazarus is another one of the Gospel of John’s long, beautiful stories. We have heard of the woman at the well, the healing of the blind man, and now here is Lazarus. A story of life out of death on this fifth Sunday of Lent. A story of life out of death spoken into our moment of fear, illness, and death.

Jesus had friends. Good friends. Three of them were siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. When Lazarus became ill, the sisters sent word to Jesus, and yet he did not show up. It took Jesus a couple of days just to get started in his travels. Mary and Martha were at home with their brother, watching his health deteriorate and waiting for Jesus to show up, but he doesn’t come in time to prevent the death of Lazarus. So perhaps these faithful siblings wondered if Jesus got the message. If he did get the message and didn’t come, they might have questioned if he even cared. Garth Brooks may give thanks for unanswered prayer in his classic song, yet we may find our own unanswered prayers a challenge. Sometimes we wait a matter of days such as Mary and Martha; for others of us our petitions continue for years. Sometimes our prayers are ours alone; sometimes, we are all praying for the same thing. Does Jesus hear and care?

Note the references to love in the scripture reading today. “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” (John 11:3) and “See how he loved him!” (John 11:36) Both when Jesus was at a distance before he traveled to see the family and when he was near after he arrived in Bethany, he loved Lazarus. In fact, Jesus was so moved by the death and pain that he saw, that he wept. Illness, pain, death is not what God desires. Even when we are not aware of it and when God’s seems to be at a distance, divine love is real. Jesus heard the message and loved them. He still hears and loves.

When Jesus finally arrived in the town of Bethany, where Mary and Martha lived, it was four days after Lazarus died. Martha came out to meet Jesus and commented on his absence. “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.” (John 11:21-22) She complained about her Lord’s absence, yet also expressed confidence in God. With this comment, there begins a crucial dialogue. Jesus responded to Martha saying, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” (John 11:23-24) Martha’s response about resurrection reflected a common belief at the time. A doctrine of resurrection of the body came to be a part of Israelite theology beginning in the 2nd century B.C. and was widely accepted by the time of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> At some future time, the last day, people hoped for resurrection. When Jesus said, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha heard it as an ordinary statement of sympathy and comfort, one typical of her time.

While Martha was not wrong in her affirmation of resurrection on the last day, she missed what was right in front of her. Martha was thinking about some future time, an unknown distant date, while Jesus was focused

---

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Brown, The Gospel of John I-XII, p. 434

entirely on the present. Martha's understanding and convictions were inadequate for the present moment. Biblical scholar, Raymond Brown wrote that "to make Martha understand that [Jesus] has the power to give life now, he will act out a drama of the gift of life by raising Lazarus."<sup>2</sup>

The miracle of raising Lazarus is all the way at the end of the story, recorded in just two verses. The stone is rolled away from the tomb, Jesus cries "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43) and the dead man appears. Many who saw this miracle believed in Jesus as a result of it.

What Jesus demonstrates to Martha, and to all the disciples that have followed her, is that God brings life out of death. It is what God does and what God is doing even now. This doesn't mean that we will see miracles like that of Lazarus, but it does mean we can see God bring forth good even in the midst of pain, hope in the midst of despair, and life where once there was none. This is possible for the One who is Life is among us. Martha was facing Jesus, the person in whom heaven and earth meet. God incarnate on earth. Jesus came to bring light and life (John 1:4) ; this is made known in the healing of the blind man and the raising of Lazarus. And Jesus who stood before Martha is still with us today. Christ is present among us and we see glimpses of the way heaven and earth meet, even now.

I hope in this difficult season we are in, you are beginning to see how God is bringing forth goodness. Personally, I am astounded by the creativity that is blossoming all around us. Humans, made in the image of a creative God, are delightfully imaginative and resourceful. Poetry, videos, photographs, and devotionals are springing up all around us. Porch photography, with plenty of social distance, is becoming a new phenomenon while birthday parties and wedding receptions become a parade of greetings from passing vehicles. The scientific innovations are marvellous. Duke Hospital now has the capacity to decontaminate and reuse protective hospital masks,<sup>3</sup> which will ease the shortage of the much needed N95 masks. A friend told me a story of additional creativity with protective masks. A hospital had a supply of PAPRs, power, air-purifying respirators, which had been in storage. These are the bigger masks with air hoses. When the devices were examined, staff discovered that the tubing was no longer functional, which in another time would mean that the unit would be discarded. While most were ready to give up on the protective devices, a few took a different route. They went to a local home store, purchased plumbing tubing and supplies that could be sterilized, then switched the hoses on the respirators. Apparently, the equipment is not particularly pretty, but it is entirely safe and functional. I am grateful to God for all of this creatively.

I am also grateful for the generosity that is evident around us. Neighbors are calling on one another and businesses are offering their services for free. This week in Detroit, one company was on the street handing out free toilet paper while a car wash company cleaned and sanitized the vehicles of medical personnel for free.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, various celebrities and musicians are sharing their gifts with others. A celebrity DJ, who goes by the name D-Nice, has used his Instagram account to share dance tunes. He calls it "Club Quarantine", and the number of followers for this virtual dance party skyrocketed.<sup>5</sup>

Creativity and generosity are signs of resurrection and life. No, they are not as dramatic as bringing a dead man out of the tomb, and yet we know that God works in all sorts of ways -- some grand and visible, some small

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Duke University, "Duke Starts Novel Decontamination of N95 Masks to Help Relieve Shortages", March 26, 2020, <https://medschool.duke.edu/about-us/news-and-communications/med-school-blog/duke-starts-novel-decontamination-n95-masks-help-relieve-shortages>

<sup>4</sup> The Detroit News, "Metro Detroiters share kindness and generosity during COVID-19 crisis", March 26, 2020, <https://www.detroitnews.com/picture-gallery/news/local/detroit-city/2020/03/26/metro-detroiters-share-kindness-and-generosity-during-covid-19-crisis/2921182001/>

<sup>5</sup> LA Times "From an L.A. living room, an unlikely coronavirus hero emerges: 'Club Quarantine's' DJ D-Nice" March 27, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-03-27/d-nice-club-quarantine-instagram-live>

and subtle. In addition, much of what God is doing we don't yet see. We may only understand it in hindsight, Nonetheless, we can be grateful for all the ways that God is bringing life and light into our world.

North Carolina is now under a "shelter in place" order, requiring citizens to stay home to prevent the spread of disease. Essential services will continue such as city infrastructure, health care, and food distribution. Thank you sanitation workers, grocery store employees, and health care providers. We are grateful for you. In this season, I think many of us are discovering new definitions of what is truly "essential". As we honestly consider this, there are many things in our lives that are not quite as essential as we may have once thought.

The gospel of John helps us to reflect on what is essential and what is central. The story of the raising of Lazarus is in the middle of the book. It is the last miracle story told in the "Book of Signs", which is how some describe the first half of the gospel of John as it is filled with signs and wonders. The second half of John is the "Book of Glory", which tells of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The story of the death and raising of Lazarus marks the transition between the two sections.

So this story of Lazarus is in the center of the gospel of John. And at the center of the story, literally half-way through, is the dialogue between Jesus and Martha. Martha stands before Jesus in the midst of her pain and grief, able only to articulate a future hope. Jesus, right there in front of her, right there in front of us, declares that life and resurrection is now. Even now, God brings life out of death.

This story of the raising of Lazarus dares us to believe that no matter what our predicament we can find true life here.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus said, "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?" (John 11:25-26)

Yes, Lord, we believe.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>6</sup> Osvaldo Vena, Commentary on John 11:1-45, April 2, 2017, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3192](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3192)