

“The Eternal Life”

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:17-27

March 26, 2023

Sometimes when I use an illustration, I realize I really am dating myself. Oh, I wish I could be more up-to-date but I largely stopped watching most television programs years ago. All that to say, I'm sure there is a more recent analogue show but I'm just not aware of it. The show I remember that works is one called, “Three’s Company” and it was an early 80s era sitcom about three roommates. Two were women, one was a guy and that set up lots of hilarious situations. The typical show revolved around a familiar plot line. Someone would get just “half the story” and then do so lunatic things until the whole story was revealed, generally to their embarrassment. For example, one of the roommates would see the other one with a new man. They’d assume that it was a boyfriend. Turns out, it was their brother. But that only would get revealed after some hilarity ensued from the misunderstanding.

Half the story can sure get us into trouble sometimes. I recollect going off half-cocked on a clerk one time when I didn’t understand the whole story. Gosh, I’d like to have those moments back. I’m sure you’ve experienced something similar. When you only get half the story, you’re bound to miss out.

I begin there very deliberately because it seems like when it comes to Jesus Christ, many of us only get half the picture, half the story so to speak. And here, in John 11, we have one of the most quoted verses of scripture. But I think we only hear half of it. Only get half of the story. In John 11:25-26, Jesus says, *“I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”* I think we get the resurrection part. Who here doesn’t enjoy knowing that even though we die, yet shall we live? There is something about the knowledge of eternal life that makes this life more bearable. We can handle the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, we can handle the loss of loved ones, illnesses even with a firm resolve knowing that death isn’t the final word for us. That we live on beyond our graves in and through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

As I prepared this week’s sermon, I was struck by the fact that two of the readings we hear most frequently at funerals appear in the lectionary in the weeks approaching Easter. Last week, we read Psalm 23. This week, we heard the raising of Lazarus. Within this passage, we hear a verse most often read at funerals. Obviously, this verse is read at funerals because it offers profound comfort in times of loss. Standing in the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus’ words provide spiritual balm for wounds inflicted by the death of a loved one.

And while these words do offer us an amazing future hope, that’s only half the story. On one-level, Lazarus’ resurrection speaks to an eternal life to be enjoyed after our physical death. But look closer and you’ll see this story more powerfully speaks to us here and now. Looking at what happens to Lazarus, we see there’s another hope, a far more immediate one. So just like Sheila did last week, I invite you to hear these familiar verses in a new context. Hear it speak to you and your life in the present tense. Read the passage!

Our reading begins with Martha hurrying out to meet Jesus. She’s half in grief, half in anger. You see, Jesus is coming to Bethany. Now, He’s four days late by Martha’s reckoning. But she still holds out hope. After all, Martha knows Jesus is capable of doing amazing things. And so, Martha rushes out to encounter Him filled with a teary-eyed hope. She says *“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.”* Her hope is palpable in her words, even if what she wants seems a little far-fetched by this point. Lazarus, as we know, has been dead four days. Now to us, dead is dead, the number of days is irrelevant. However, in Jewish belief at the time, four days was significant. You see, Jews of the era believed the soul tarried about the body for three days. Within that three-day window, there was the possibility of a restored life through a miracle. A dim, faint hope at best, but hope nonetheless. On the fourth day though, that slim optimism evaporated. The soul was gone and with it any possibility of life restored. Jesus responds plainly to Martha’s half-uttered hope for the return of Lazarus. *“Your brother will rise again”* Jesus says. Yes, yes, she responds as though condescended to. Martha knows the future. Someday, in the sweet by and by we’ll all rise from the grave. And in a way, that knowledge offers her some comfort. But not the kind of immediate relief she’s looking for. Someday seems awfully far away after all. Martha wants him NOW. Jesus responds with what are some of the greatest words we’ll ever hear. *“I am the Resurrection and the Life.”* Martha has only got half the picture. Yes, Jesus affirms, He is the resurrection, the long-awaited hope for an eternal existence. But that’s only HALF of what Jesus says.

Think about it, if that’s all Jesus wanted us to reveal to us He would’ve said something like this – yes Martha, I am the resurrection, those who believe in Me even though they die will live forever. But that isn’t what He

says, thanks be to God. *"I am the life"* He adds into the mix. *"Everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die."* And what He reveals is that an amazing, abundant, eternal life is possible here and now.

You see, Jesus is offering us more than a future hope. He's offering the possibility of life in all its fullness right now, right here in our present. I think in a lot of ways it's interesting to note how much like Martha we are when it comes to what we believe about life in Christ. Just like Martha, we believe our faith in Jesus makes eternal life possible. We profess that somehow, someday, we will live after our physical demise. And more often than not, that's where we leave it. Resurrection is entirely a future hope.

But in our rush to the future, we overlook the immediate. Those who believe in Him will never die Jesus says. And what He points us to is the reality that Resurrection life is available to us now. Open your eyes and see! Jesus speaks a word to us in the present. Here as we linger half-dead, mired in the tomb of our sins. We've latched on to the hope of life beyond the grave but left behind the more immediate prospect of an abundant life now. We've overlooked that Jesus offers us a life free from longing and fear that's available to us in the present day. And in so doing, we've done an injustice to the Gospel of John. Throughout the fourth Gospel, Jesus paints a picture of hope which has **ALREADY ARRIVED**. What Jesus says is that in Him, the Kingdom of God has been brought forward into the present. The light shines in the darkness and it shines **RIGHT NOW**. The hour is coming and is **NOW** here. That's the language of John's Gospel

What theologians call this is the proleptic involvement of the Kingdom of God in our time. Now don't get confused by the language. All prolepsis means is this – a flash forward. It's like you're reading a story and all of the sudden, into the current timeline of events, the narrator brings a scene from later on and places it right smack dab into the middle of the story, changing how the rest of the story is read. What this teaches us is that when Jesus came in the flesh, He brought the Kingdom with Him. Through the power of the Holy Spirit that joyful end is available to us, even now. It's a flash forward of wonderful. Resurrection life made possible in the present day. That's why Jesus says that no one who believes in Him will **EVER** die. They won't ever **DIE** because He's sharing with them the life of the Kingdom in the here and now. In death, Christians merely move from abundant life into eternal life. What I mean is this. In Jesus Christ, what will be enjoyed in its fullness after He comes again is made available to us **NOW** through our faith in Him. Yes, there's eternal life for us. But there's also the possibility for an amazingly wonderful life here and now! Because in this moment, the Kingdom is Alive within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. What that means is that you and I no longer have to live life dead in our sins and our fears and our guilt. We can be raised from that living death through the shining light of Jesus Christ.

And to emphasize His point, Jesus is going to do something amazing to show us. *"Then Jesus came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.'"* Martha, hopelessly confused by such antics cries out *"Lord, already there's a stench because he has been dead four days."* Lazarus isn't just dead, he's stinking dead. He's gone, with no possibility of hope in the present. Jesus says to Martha – *"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"* With great heaving and pulling, the stone is rolled away from the tomb. A quiet comes over the crowd. They expect nothing to emerge from the tomb save the stench of death. Jesus utters a prayer. When He had said this, Jesus cried with a loud voice, *"Lazarus, come out!"* Lazarus emerges from the darkness of his tomb into the glorious light of Jesus Christ. Jesus said to the gathered people, *"Unbind him, and let him go."* Let him go to really live his life unencumbered by fear and sin and death!

Lazarus is resurrected into a new life but he's not yet been raised yet into eternal life. Even emerging from the tomb, Lazarus will "die" again by the eyes of the world. But here, Jesus draws Lazarus into something new, something special. In Second Corinthians, Paul writes *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"* Emerging from the tomb, Lazarus is that **NEW** creation made possible by Jesus. His old life is dead and buried. The new life begun. At the baptismal font, we believe that everyone of us has undergone the death of the old life. We died to that decaying life filled with sin and misery and were joined into the new life through Jesus Christ.

But too often we live our lives in such a way that doesn't remotely exhibit that reality. Even though we are **NOW** new creation, some part of us longs for the old, dead life. We strangely feel more comfortable lying dead in our tombs. So, we return back into our tombs and bind ourselves in burial rags. Some of us are bound by our sins. Others of us are held by destructive habits and life-draining beliefs. Some of us are bound by fears others by guilt. All of those bindings leave us living more in the decaying past than in the wonderful present.

But make no mistake about it, we bind ourselves with things which no longer have power over us. Victory has come in Jesus Christ. His life is our life and His is an abundant life, teeming with love and peace and joy and security. Light has broken into the darkness. The hour IS NOW here. The great end of the Kingdom of God has been brought forward and in faith it intersects with our lives in Jesus Christ. The Good News of the Gospel is that those who believe in Jesus will never die. We may lie in wait in our self-erected tombs but the Gospel promise is that Jesus will come there, to that place of longing and hurt and death and decay. He'll call out our names and we'll respond to Him. We'll step out of the shadows of the vestiges of the old life and into a brave new world filled with the kind of fulfilling existence we all desperately long for.

Resurrection life is a wonderful life because it comes with so many benefits. First of all, Resurrection life comes with hope. There is, in the regenerate soul, an unshakeable hope for the future. One that is unquenchable, even under the worst of circumstances. First, we recognize that God Himself is with us in this time and place by the power of the Holy Spirit. But we also know that when our days are ended, we will be resurrected to enjoy eternity in the Kingdom of God.

One of the most famous examples of the power of hope in fiction can be found in the classic novella "The Shawshank Redemption" by Stephen King, which was adapted into a highly acclaimed movie. The story revolves around Andy Dufresne, an innocent man who is wrongly convicted of murder and sent to Shawshank State Penitentiary. Despite being subjected to brutal treatment and constantly fighting against corruption and abuse, Andy never loses hope of one day being released from prison and starting a new life. Throughout the novel, Andy maintains his hope and never gives up on his dream of freedom. He uses his skills as an accountant to gain favor with the prison guards and eventually creates a plan to escape. Through sheer willpower and determination, Andy is able to carry out his escape and start a new life in Mexico. *His story serves as a powerful testament to the awesome power of hope, even in the darkest of circumstances.*

Resurrection life also comes with transformation. But it isn't just a future hope that gives us power. So too does the transformation from death into new life see us changed by the power of God.

I'm reminded of the story of Dr. Martin Overton. Now look, it's rare that glimpses of new life make the pages of the Wall Street Journal, but in his case, it did. Back a few years ago, the Journal did a story on this man, a brain-surgeon by profession. One of the best ones in all the nation truth be told. He was busy, successful...but he wasn't content. So, one day he makes his way into a small church on the outside of town. Weeks pass, he's there in the pews, never missing a Sunday, even he doesn't quite know why he keeps coming back but he does. Several weeks later, he started experiencing strange pains in his abdomen. Tests quickly revealed a problem. Terminal cancer, that's what the specialists said. So, Dr. Overton clung to his church with even greater vigor. He studied the scriptures with the pastor and the rest of the congregation. He helped out making meals for shut-ins. Even in his dying, he came alive. Amazingly, after several months, the tests revealed the cancer was gone. Nobody knows whether the first test was wrong or whether it was a miracle in the truest sense of the word. But here's what Dr. Overton knows. Dr. Overton confesses that he learned what it truly means to live in those days where he thought he was going to die. Before he was called away from his tomb, Dr. Overton's god was wine. Not that he was an alcoholic, rather he owned one of the finest collections of wine in the entire country. It was valued at over \$3 million dollars. In the article, Dr. Overton states "wine had become my idol. I worshipped the god Bacchus...I was an excellent heathen." But after having been called out of his tomb, Dr. Overton auctioned off his entire collection giving all the proceeds to charity. By his own description, prior to new life breaking forward into his living death, Dr. Overton was a great doctor but he confessed himself to be rather cold-hearted. He was coarse with patients, couldn't shed a tear. His attitude toward his patients more often than not was "tough luck for you. Let's see if we can do anything about it." Now, he prays with his patients. Cries with them in their grief and confusion. He donates his services more often than he accepts payment. He's a new man. The new life blossoming within him. Dr. Overton's been pulled from a living death into an abundant life in Christ.

"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." Christ's words speak to a potential all of us have in Him! We don't have to remain dead in our tombs, we can be summoned out among the living through the words of our Lord. Into our true inheritance. Although we may feel decaying inside, withered by our sins and shortcomings, Jesus will summon us yet again. He'll call us forward into His future.

Who among us doesn't know that something they're doing is wrong but still find themselves doing it, even knowing it keeps them living in darkness? Who here hasn't held on to some anger or resentment or prejudice even though we realize it's decaying us from the inside out? Is there anyone of us here who doesn't hold on to a deep guilt over the past which blinds us to the light of Christ's forgiveness? Too often we all feel four-days dead!

On this Sunday morning, I want every one of us to hear Jesus Christ standing outside tombs where we've chosen to reside. Hear His voice shout to have the stone moved. Hear Him call your name and say "Come OUT!" Come out of your tombs. Enjoy the new and abundant life made possible in Christ Jesus.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.