

That You May Believe

Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-54 (ESV)

April 22, 2007

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” Martha said, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ.” “Yes, Lord; I believe.” Jesus had said from the beginning that this illness of Lazarus was for the glory of God, for the glorification of the Son of God, and so that his disciples might believe. That is the reason Lazarus was ill. That is the reason Lazarus died. That is the reason Lazarus was buried. That is the reason that Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and restored him to life. So here Martha professes her faith in Jesus Christ clearly and powerfully, the fullest such profession so far in the Gospel according to John, and she does so even before Jesus raised Lazarus, believing in the plain word of his gospel, which, of course, is still available here in the Bible for us to believe today. What a wonderful example she gives us! Thanks be to God!

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” Here is a summary statement of the gospel in response to which Martha professed her faith. Exactly what is being said here which led her to believe? First of all, Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. There was already an expectation of a general resurrection, a raising of all people from death to life, at the end of time. Martha referred to that when she said of Lazarus, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” The general resurrection will be, of course, a mighty act of God overcoming the power of death. For Jesus already to *be* the resurrection and the life is for Jesus to be the power of God in advance of the end time and for Jesus to be God himself present with us now. This was confirmed when Jesus himself was resurrected. For even though there was an expectation of a general resurrection at the end of time, there was no expectation of any individual resurrection apart from that or ahead of that. So when Jesus was resurrected nearly 2,000 years ago, it was understood that his resurrection was the beginning of that great general resurrection yet to come, the breaking in of the future upon the present, the first wave of the great victory of God over death.

Moreover, in that Jesus is already the resurrection, he is also presently the life. Not only was he the agent of all creation, the one through whom all things were

made and without whom was not any thing made that was made (John 1:3), and not only is he the goal of salvation, to which we are all drawn (John 12:32), but also he is here and now the life by which alone we live (John 1:4, 14:6). We do not live by our own strength, though we should be as strong as we can. We do not live by our own intelligence, though we should be as smart as we can. We do not live by our own hard work, though we should work as hard as we can. We live instead by the sheer grace and mercy of God Almighty, poured out upon us in the life and person and Jesus Christ. He alone is our life, and it is our well-being to realize and to know that.

Second, and following directly upon this, believing in Jesus Christ leads to life, even life beyond death. “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” Believing in Jesus Christ, who alone is our life, certainly leads to life here and now. We have already said that. What he has added to this is the good news that believing in Jesus Christ, who alone is our life, also leads to life beyond death. Believing in Jesus Christ leads to a kind and quality of life that even death cannot destroy. This is not to say that death is not real. But it is to say that God can give life even beyond death. That God can and does do this in and through Jesus Christ was immediately demonstrated when, by the power of God, Jesus called forth Lazarus from the tomb.

Third, the life beyond death to which believing in Jesus Christ leads is a new and different life, even eternal life. We may make this association so automatically that we do not realize what is being added here. Lazarus was raised from death to life again, but he was raised back to this life, from which he surely had to die again. So the gospel is not simply that we shall live again. The gospel is that we shall live again and forever. “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” This second clause is not merely a repetition of the first. Jesus adds something different here. Not only does believing in Jesus lead to life beyond death, but also the life beyond death to which believing in Jesus leads is such that those who live it shall never die again. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). So this new life is not resuscitation to this life. This new life is not merely continuation of this earthly life. This new life is resurrection to eternal life, forever beyond disease, decay, decline and death. This is the resurrection life which Jesus bring to us.

Fourth, the gospel of Jesus Christ calls for a response. Every one who hears the gospel necessarily either believes it or does not believe it. There is no middle ground. “Do you believe this?” Jesus asked this question of Martha and so today he asks it of each of us. “Do you believe this?” You may answer, “Yes,” or you may answer, “No,” but those are your only two choices. If you say, “I do not know,” that

is no better than saying, “No, I do not,” and that has eternal consequences. If you say, “I do not care,” you are exposing your ignorance about all things important. If you say, “Let me think about it until tomorrow,” you are banking on a tomorrow that may never come, and such stalling is another way of saying, “No.” If you say, “That is your truth, but it is not mine,” that is even worse than saying, “No,” for that is rejection of the very possibility of truth and therefore the rejection of life and salvation. But if you say, “Yes,” if you believe in Jesus as the resurrection and the life, if you believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you will have eternal life and you will have it abundantly (John 10:10). Which will it be for you?

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” Martha said, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” Here is the summary of the gospel in today’s reading from the gospel, and here is the summary of Martha’s response to this gospel. It is on the basis of this great gospel and as a consequence of this great faith that Jesus called forth Lazarus from the tomb. “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” What a wonderful promise! “If you believe you will see the glory of God.” And so she did. So she did. Martha saw first hand the very glory of God. Her brother had been dead for four days, but Jesus called him forth from the tomb. Thanks be to God!

The restoration of Lazarus from death to life was a visible and tangible demonstration and manifestation of the power and glory of God Almighty present and at work in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Just as Martha had believed the sheer word of his gospel, so now did many of the Jews who had come to the funeral believe in Jesus Christ because of the power of his deeds. They came as mourners. They left as believers. What a wonderful transformation! And we need to realize that the raising of Lazarus from the dead was not something that cost Jesus nothing. This was not something he did at no expense to himself. Instead, it was this very act of his giving life that, human speaking, sealed his fate in death. You would think that people would be glad about the gift of life. It appears, instead, to have terrified and infuriated the leaders. “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. Do you see the connection? Jesus gave Lazarus his life back literally at the cost of losing his own life. Thus Jesus us gives us life by giving us his own life. Do we appreciate the extent of his sacrifice for us?

The restoration of Lazarus from death to life, as powerful as it was in and of itself, was also even more a sign pointing ahead to the resurrection of Jesus Christ himself, an even greater visible and tangible demonstration and manifestation of the

power and glory of God Almighty, author and giver of life, present and at work in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Shall we believe yet today? Of course, the question necessarily arises as to why such signs as the raising of Lazarus do not continue in our own day. Surely we, as much as Martha and Mary, would like to have our dead restored to us in this life. We have been painfully reminded of that this week. But it is of the nature of a sign to point ahead to an even greater reality. So once Jesus himself was crucified and resurrected, there was no need for the signs about that to continue. This is not to say that we are without hope. No, not at all. What this does say is that our hope is not of this world. Instead, we do have a good and strong hope for the world to come and for our eternal life. We will have our loved ones restored to us, alive, well, whole, forever beyond disease, decay, decline, and death, in the eternal life. Indeed, Jesus Christ lived and died and now lives again precisely in order to glorify God, to forgive our sin, and so that we, too, may be raised to a new life, forever beyond the power of sin and death, to join our voices with those of the angels eternally singing God's praises. This is the good news we proclaim, this is the faith by which we live, and this is the good hope by which we are made brave to face tomorrow.

The Latin motto of the state of Maryland is "*Dum Spiro, Spero,*" which means "While I breathe, I hope," or "As long as I have breath, there is hope." The point of our readings today is much more radical. The Bible says that even when we are out of breath, even when we are stone cold dead, even when our bones are bleached and scattered across the surface of the valley, we still have hope. We still have good, strong, solid hope, because God wills that we live, God wills that we know that he is God, and God wills that we see his glory shining brightly in his only Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Thanks be to God!

This illness of Lazarus was for the glory of God, for the glorification of the Son of God, and so that his disciples might believe. That is the reason Lazarus was ill. That is the reason Lazarus died. That is the reason Lazarus was buried. That is the reason that Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and restored him to life. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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