

The First Presbyterian Church in Germantown
Sermon Preached
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by
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Resurrection and Life

I Corinthians 15:51-58
John 11:17-37

I went to Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and my freshman dorm was in the historic part of the town, right across from a very old cemetery dating back to the mid 1700's. We would often cut through the cemetery on our way home from classes, and we would read the various epitaphs on the tombstones. Some were sad, some faith-filled and most were interesting, as they would offer more than simply the name and dates of birth and death.

Have you ever thought about what you would like your epitaph to be? Our friend here, Rev. Kevin Porter, one we know as a peacemaker and conciliator, will tell you that he would like his tombstone to read: Kevin L. Porter . . . “Do you want me to move or am I all right where I am?”

In that vein I want to tell you about some actual epitaphs that have been seen are on some tombstones. I am truly not making these up . . . these are actual engravings on the stones:

“Harry Edsel Smith of Albany, New York: Died 1942. Looked up the elevator shaft to see if the car was on the way down. It was.”

This one is from an English cemetery: “Anna Wallace The children of Israel wanted bread, and the Lord sent them manna. Clark Wallace wanted a wife, and the Devil sent him Anna.”

In a New Mexico cemetery: “Here lies Johnny Yeast . . . Pardon me for not rising.”

In a Uniontown, Pennsylvania cemetery: “Here lies the body of Jonathan Blake. Stepped on the gas instead of the brake.”

In a cemetery in Hartscombe , England: “On the 22nd of June, Jonathan Fiddle went out of tune.”

In another English cemetery we find this thoughtful epitaph:

“Remember man, as you walk by,
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, so shall you be.
Remember this and follow me.”

To which someone replied by writing on the tombstone: “To follow you I’ll not consent . . . Until I know which way you went.”

Believe me, by sharing these epitaphs I am not making light of death, but at least trying to put it in the proper perspective. For us as Christians, we want to see death not so much as morbid and sorrowful, but in the light of an empty tomb. And so it is that our gospel lesson today is the story of the raising of Lazarus.

Without a doubt the last few months have been a difficult time for me, being with my father as his health took a sudden and rapid decline, and then as he died last month. This time with my father was not so much about death . . . but was more about life. We shared many thoughts and stories during our time together. He told me of things he and my Mom did, things I had never heard. He told me about his life growing up and in the army. We talked about when I was a child and shared family tales as we smiled together. We shared our love for one another and most of all we shared our faith together . . . a faith that is grounded in the words of Christ . . . the same words our Lord spoke to Martha in the story Chris read for us: “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.” And then Jesus asked Martha as he asks each of us, “Do you believe this?”

My father and I emphatically answered, “Yes!”

This morning I want for us to look at this story so we might learn from it as we contemplate death . . . the death of those we love (both past and future deaths) and even our own death . . . but also as we contemplate life . . . meaningful, abundant, everlasting and eternal life.

Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”
Abundantly means fully, completely, to the max.

Our gospel lesson tells us how that is possible if we recognize three truths in the story:

First, Jesus’ power over death and his ability to give us abundant and eternal life.

Second, the fact that Jesus loves us and cares for us.

And third, this is a story that gives us reason for hope.

The story actually begins in verses before where this morning's lesson begins. Word had come to Jesus that his good friend Lazarus was ill. Jesus was close to this family. He, no doubt, had spent much time with them. Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. And so it might seem strange that Jesus did not leave immediately for Bethany when he heard of his friend's illness, but the gospel writer John tells us that Jesus decided to wait until Lazarus died before going to see them. He said to the twelve, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

When our lesson that Chris read begins we learn that by the time Jesus and the disciples arrived Lazarus had been dead four days. When Martha heard Jesus was on the way, she went to meet him, as she blurted out, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

This sounds like a normal statement from one who has just lost a loved one unexpectedly. Sometimes people will say instead, "O God, why did you let this happen?" . . . Martha's words contained not only sorrow, but also disappointment . . . and maybe anger at Jesus for not being there. And then she added, "Even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." . . . Those are words of hope and also words of faith.

Jesus answered her saying, "Your brother will rise again." To which Martha said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." . . . And Jesus proclaimed to her and to us those words that we must listen to and trust, "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?"

Martha said to Jesus, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, he who is coming into the world." And she immediately went to get her sister Mary telling her, "The Master has come and is calling for you."

And what did Mary say when she saw Jesus? The same thing her sister had said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." . . . You just know these two sisters had sat together several days before when their beloved brother died and lamented the fact that Jesus was not there to prevent Lazarus' death. But again I want to point out that this statement by these two women is an indication of their faith. They recognized Jesus to be more than their friend . . . more than a compelling teacher . . . they recognized him as a religious leader like none other, who had the ability to do amazing and miraculous things. "If you were here this would not have happened." . . . and . . . "I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." and . . . "I believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, he who is coming into the world." . . . They recognized in Jesus that he truly did have power over

death . . . that he was indeed the Resurrection and Life. They believed and trusted this fact. . . . Do we? . . . Do you?

The story continues as we are told that Jesus was very moved by the tears of Mary and the other Jewish mourners. And we read: "Jesus began to weep." . . . Or as older translations say simply, "Jesus wept." . . . This is the shortest verse in the Bible yet one of the most heart-touching. . . . The tears that he shed were tears of sincere compassion that came from a caring heart. And the sympathetic neighbors, seeing him weep at Lazarus' tomb, remarked, "See how he loved him."

We need to understand that Jesus loves us that much as well. I truly believe that when we cry our Lord cries. . . . When we hurt, our Lord shares in that hurt. . . . The God who we worship is not removed and unattached.

"Jesus wept." . . . In those two words we find a Savior who genuinely cares what happens to us and what we go through. . . . But there is something else: In that act of weeping Jesus is showing us that it is all right for us to shed tears too. . . . Crying is not a sign of weakness.

I know for me at my father's death, I tried to hold back the tears for I thought that people expected me . . . especially as a minister . . . to be strong. After all I am a Christian who should be joyful at this moment when I know that my father is now at peace and living his new life. . . . But this verse . . . "Jesus wept" . . . assured me that it was okay to shed tears . . . and that Jesus was shedding tears with me. . . . As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, "For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize . . ." (4:15). "Jesus wept," and so can we. . . . And Jesus cares for us so deeply that we need to know we are not alone in what we feel.

The story does not end here as does our gospel lesson of the day, for a miracle is about to happen . . . and one that gives us great hope. . . . Jesus had the sisters and mourners lead him to Lazarus' tomb, which was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. . . . Sound familiar? His own grave would be covered with a large stone. . . . He said, "Take away the stone." . . . and Martha objected, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." . . . Martha had to be reminded to have faith, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Yes, there was that momentary lapse in faith where she questioned Jesus, but she snapped out of that and so they took away the stone. . . . Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

Jesus then called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus came out,

his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

The reason for Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave . . . of showing his power over death . . . was not so much to bring Martha and Mary their brother back from the dead, but the reason is found in Jesus' prayer: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." . . . WE are among those people who Jesus refers to as "standing here." Jesus did this for our benefit as well . . . so that we may believe that he truly is the Son of God!

Jesus raised Lazarus in order to assure those who followed him of who he was then and who he is now. . . . Lazarus' raising was not permanent. He did eventually die again physically . . . but we also need to know that he still lives. Why? Because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life and those who believe in that, even though they die, will live: and everyone who lives and believes in Jesus will never die"

For me, in my grief, this belief is a miraculous medicine that calms my soul. I believe that one day there will be a glad reunion and today's tears will be replaced with tomorrow's triumph. . . . For as Paul writes in our lesson Chris read from 1st Corinthians: "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Yes, for all of us, the separation caused by the death of a loved one is an occasion for grief. We have every right to feel the loss. . . . Jesus affirmed that as He stood crying at Lazarus' tomb. . . . But as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Go ahead and grieve . . . but don't do it as those who have no hope."

"Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life, those who believe in Christ will live, even though they die. And whosoever lives and believes in Christ will never die." . . . This is a message that we all need to hear and believe, not just because it will help us in our time of grief, but because it will help us in the living of our lives today and every day.

This is a message that the Church needs to share . . . in fact it is the primary message that the Church needs to share. With old and young alike. We need to promise to share it with those who are brought before this baptismal font, as will Selina Marie-Lynn Owens in just a few minutes. The promise of the resurrection is for her just as it was for her great-grandfather Bennie a few years ago . . . as it was for my father . . . and as it is for each and every one of us and our loved ones . . . if we just believe and trust in Jesus Christ.

In preparing for this sermon I found this thought of a commentator: "To believe that Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life is the liberation of life. Believers are

not in the land of the living on their way to the land of the dying. We are dwelling in the land of the dying on our way to the land of the living.”

Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life. To claim this when life is kind and joyous and the birds are singing and the flowers are blooming is one thing. . . . Yet even more important is to affirm it when the day is dark and gloomy and sad and frightening. . . . We need to cry it then not weakly, but triumphantly: “Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and Life.” That my friends is what gives us life . . . gives us hope. That is what our faith depends upon!

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.