

Resurrection, Already

John 11:1-45

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The fifth Sunday of Lent is Lazarus Sunday. It might seem strange to talk about resurrection during the purple season of repentance. Aren't we jumping the gun? I think the tradition was established so that after more than a month in Lent we can come up for air before diving down deep to the dark stuff.

Lazarus is not the only person raised from the dead by Jesus. The synoptic gospels all have stories of Jesus raising the dead. But in those gospels they seem to be "just" miracle stories, not that different from other healings and exorcisms. But in John's gospel this raising from the dead is the climax of all the miracles. Scholars call the first half of the gospel "The Book of Signs," because it is organized around miracles that John calls signs—and this is the final one. They are not just miracles that point to Jesus' power; they are signs that point to something about Jesus' nature. The most obvious example is the sign of healing the man born blind, after which Jesus declares "I am the light of the world." That is a story, like all the rest, about *our* relationship to Jesus. We are like the man born blind, spiritually, and Jesus opens our eyes to see him, to see the light that is Jesus.

This story is not just about an event that happened in history, although I assume it *is* that. This story is not just placed in the gospel to foreshadow the resurrection of Jesus, although it functions that way. This story is here to tell us that Jesus *is* the resurrection, and that we ourselves as listeners can also have life through him. The one who is lying in the tomb in this story is not only Lazarus. It is you and I who are lying in the tomb, waiting to be called out by Jesus.

Jesus says, "I am the resurrection." What does the New Testament mean by the word "resurrection"? It does not mean resuscitation, which is probably a better way to describe what happened to Lazarus. It certainly does not mean going to heaven as a spirit, or a disembodied soul, or an angel. Resurrection was a Jewish idea, not the Greek idea of a soul that would survive the dissolution of the body. Resurrection meant that your body, your whole self, would be renewed, and that renewed self was accompanied by the renewal of all things—the new heaven and the new earth, when earth and heaven would become one. For the Jews of the first century, resurrection was an event that would happen at the conclusion of this world order when the Messiah came. The dead would be raised to life and God's people would be restored as a nation living in peace and freedom.

The resurrection, for the Pharisees and the majority of Jewish believers in Jesus' time, was a future event for which they hoped devoutly. As you read the letters of Paul—who was himself a Pharisee—you find an emphasis on that future hope. He says "you were saved in hope;" "you were called to one hope;" he calls God "the God of hope." Christians live, he says, in the hope that we will someday share Jesus' resurrection as we are now sharing his suffering. We ourselves will one day be raised to new bodies animated by God's Spirit rather than by the energy of the flesh.

I do not think that John or his community would have disagreed with that, but they wanted to balance that teaching with an emphasis on the present reality of eternal life. Here in John 11 we have a story that says that new life can happen *now*. The resurrection is not only something to hope for after we are dead. The resurrection, Jesus says, is more than a historical event that can be dated at some point in the future. The resurrection is in his person. He *is* the resurrection. When we encounter the risen Christ we have encountered the resurrection. When he gives us life, it is eternal life, now.

When John 3:16 says that Jesus came so that we would not perish but have eternal life—literally, the life of the age to come, as we saw two weeks ago—do you think the verse is only talking about what will happen after you die? What about that life that Jesus promises the woman at the well, life that will spring up out of your core like a fountain? What about the life that Jesus says he came to give, abundant life, overflowing life? Was that all about something that happens in another realm after we are dead?

It is worth asking ourselves today whether we are focused on death or on life. What is the meaning of this table? Is it only about remembering that Jesus died? Or does it remind us that Jesus is actually present among us as a living person? Is it about getting forgiven so we can get into heaven, or is it about sharing Jesus' life here and now? I think you know where John would point us.

Years ago I read about a Jewish sociologist who wrote a book about Christian fundamentalists in Amarillo, Texas. She talked about the influence of Premillennialism—the focus of attention on Jesus' *second* coming as the locus of salvation. She said that these people—and I assume many were Baptists—“live in deferment, not fulfillment.” As she saw it, they downgraded the importance of the first coming of Jesus into the world. Nothing will be solved, they say, until the great windup of history. The sociologist found herself as a Jew reminding Christians, “But Jesus *came!*” She said, “Going from church to church in Amarillo, the impression is unavoidable: some of the most ardent born and born-again Christians are writing Christianity off as something that did not, could not work—at least, not in the first coming” [A. G. Mojtabai, quoted by Don Shriver in *Report from the Capital*, January 1989].

At Harbor Church not many of us are fans of the *Left Behind* series and we may not be sure what we think about the Second Coming. But we too may find ourselves living in deferment rather than in fulfillment. We too may think that eternal life is something for the future, that the cross we reenact symbolically at this table was basically a ticket to heaven rather than a doorway to life, eternal life here and now.

Back to the story. Imagine that you are Martha. Your brother is dead. Many of you know what that feels like. You are surrounded by Middle Eastern mourners who wail loudly. You are dressed in black. You are exhausted after four days of this. Then the preacher shows up. Isn't that the way preachers are? Too little, too late. Of course, this is not just any preacher. This is the one who is famous for doing miracles. He is a healer. But he was too busy to heal your brother.

The first thing you say to Jesus is “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” We blame Jesus for what happens. In a strange way it is an expression of faith. We do believe that Jesus could have made a difference; that's what makes us mad. Where was he?

Martha is disappointed in the preacher, but she has not given up on him entirely. “Even now I know that God will give you what you ask for.” What does she think Jesus will ask for? Clearly not a resurrection, because when they go to the tomb she doesn't even want it opened. Most likely she is thinking that God will give some comfort, some relief from this pain she's in. If you couldn't heal my brother, heal me. I'm the one dying here now.

Jesus says to her, “Your brother will rise to life.” Martha hears that as the kind of platitude people say at funerals, the Jewish equivalent of “He's in a better place.” Most Jews did believe in a resurrection of the dead at the end of time, so it was common to encourage other Jews by reminding them of that doctrine. Martha says, “Yeah, I know. I know that my brother will rise to life on the last day.”

Then Jesus says something completely unexpected: “I AM the resurrection and the life.” I'm not talking about the resurrection as a doctrine. I'm not talking about a date out in the future when the dead will be raised to life. I'm talking about life here and now. I AM the resurrection. This eternal life you hope for is standing right in front of you. It's not an event; it's a person. If you believe in me you have eternal life right now.

Baptist scholar William Hull wrote, “Jesus himself embodied the reality of the last day already come in the midst of time” [*Broadman Bible Commentary*]. Jesus does not say to Martha, “I will raise your brother up.” He says, “I am in my person the resurrection for which you are hoping.” “I am” means the reality of God’s presence in the present tense. Jesus did not teach us *how* to have eternal life; Jesus *is* eternal life.

This is shocking. Most Christians haven’t absorbed it. Eternal life is not just about heaven. Being raised to a new life isn’t something that happens on the last day. Jesus is standing in front of us offering us life right now — and what he is about to do to Lazarus is a picture of that.

The Gospel of John wants to show us in no uncertain terms that the Christian life is not about getting a ticket to heaven and then just waiting through this dreary life. It’s not about getting saved and then hoping that Jesus comes back so you can experience eternal life. The life Jesus offers us is a life of being connected to Jesus beginning right now.

This is the meaning of Christian baptism. The main symbolism of immersion is that we share in Jesus’ resurrection. Colossians 2:12 says that you were buried with Christ in baptism, and *you were raised* (past tense) to new life because you trusted in the mighty power of God who raised Jesus from the dead. Romans 6:4 says that we are buried with him in baptism *in order that we may live a new life*.

The death we remember at this table and the resurrection we celebrate on Easter Sunday are both about giving you a new life—the life of Jesus himself, the life of the age to come which enters into us and animates our lives in the midst of this old world. The offer still stands. Jesus still asks us as he asked Martha, “Do you believe this?” Our very life hangs on our answer.