

John 11:1-46 “The Giver of Life” by Associate Pastor Amanda Ayars

Our passage this morning is a familiar one to most people as I think that it is one of the most commonly used passages of scripture at funerals. This passage offers hope to the grieving, gives life to those who are left here to mourn and it gives us comfort when we think about our own death- comfort knowing that death doesn't have the final word. This passage is important for a multitude of reasons. It gives us assurance that if we believe in Christ we are saved, not from a physical death but from a spiritual death. It gives us comfort in that Christ himself is concerned with our grief; we see his compassion and mercy to his friends Martha and Mary, this compassion is also then for us as well. This passage shows us that God is in control, even in death and while we might not always understand the timing of death, why death occurs and why we have to grieve, it is comforting nonetheless to know that Christ himself identifies with us in our grief. And yet I think that there is more to this passage than the simple assurance and comfort that it gives us during our time of grief.

Our passage is the last of sign stories in John's Gospel. Remember John gives us signs that point us to who Christ is and the power that Christ has. Remember Christ has changed water into wine, healed a man's son, fed 5,000; healed a paralytic by the pool of Bethesda and more. Our passage starts off with Christ in another region of the country teaching and healing when he gets news from Martha and Mary that his friend Lazarus (the one who Jesus loves) is ill. But what is so strange is the fact that Jesus doesn't drop everything to go to his friend. Our text tells us that he waits and shows up 4 days after Lazarus has died; and what for, to show the glory of God. It doesn't resonate with us that Christ who loves Lazarus would wait to go to his friend. After all if someone whom we loved was ill, we would drop everything to run and be by their side. It's not that Jesus doesn't want to go to Lazarus its that Jesus is about doing the work of his heavenly Father. Christ must first serve God and then serve others and it is by serving God first that Christ then can serve another. Jesus acts according to his own timing and not according to external pressures even if the person is someone whom he loves; remember Jesus doesn't act immediately when his mother begs him to change the water into wine either. Even if Jesus had dropped everything and left to be by his friends side, Lazarus would have already been dead. Remember it would have taken the messenger a couple of days to arrive and a couple of days for Jesus to return to Bethany. Jesus knew that something greater was going to happen. He knew that Lazarus death would be for the glory of God.

This sign, this miracle was to be for the glory of God, to reveal the power and glory of God through Christ himself. Some truth about the meaning of God's glory and presence in the world is being made known through Jesus' ministry and Jesus' actions in this story. Christ hints at all of this at the beginning of the passage, by saying that “this illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it,” in other words, Lazarus illness will be more than just a healing it will be Christ's way of revealing to the world the glory of God's power and I believe to give a glimpse of what Christ's ultimate mission was, to lay down his own life and conquer death by rising again. So while on the one hand this miracle seems to us to have been

avoidable if Christ had just left when he heard the message, or even healed Lazarus from a distance as he did the soldier's son, and yet we would have missed the greater revelation; that Christ has the power over death. So on the one hand this is a story about the resurrection of Lazarus it is also a story of Christ's death and resurrection. The cruel irony of this passage is that Jesus will be put to death because he brought Lazarus back to life. After the raising of Lazarus, the Sanhedrin gathers where Caiaphas the high priest and the rest begin to look for an opportunity to put Christ to death. Christ had to have known that by going back to Bethany his life would be in danger and that it would be only a matter of time before his own life would end. And yet he returned to be with his friends and to do the work of God.

So Christ shows up late. Martha being the oldest comes out to greet him and in some sense chastise him "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." But she recognizes even in the grief that God is in control that God's will reigns over everything else and so she says to Christ "even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Here Christ and Martha begin a theological discussion about death and resurrection. It is important for us to understand that Jews believed in a resurrection when all things were complete and God restored creation to its original design all of God's chosen people would be resurrected into new life. But Jesus says more than "yes Martha you are right, eventually we will all be resurrected in to new life." Rather Christ says something astonishing; he says "I Am the resurrection and the life." Jesus doesn't say "I can provide resurrection and life, but rather that he is the resurrection and life." I am the one who can give life, I am the one who can bring back the dead (which is all of us, for the wages of sin are death), Christ has the power always to redeem the lost. In other words, eternal life and rescue from the finality of death are not merely gifts obtained by begging to God; they are not gifts obtained if we are lucky at the end of all time; no rather they are aspects of what it means to live a life in association with Jesus- we will receive life, but not just any life, a resurrection life- a new life. 2 Corinthians puts it this way "so if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything old has become new." If Jesus is life, then those who believe in him will enjoy the confidence and power over death known by Christ and will become new creations. We will be made new in the eyes of God and will be eternally his. When Christ says I am the resurrection and the life, it is often underestimated by us as people who live on the on the other side of Easter. For many of us we know the story so well that it becomes just words instead of having the deep meaning that it is supposed to cause deep joy within us, Jesus was born, he lived, he did some miracles and then he died on a cross for us. He was resurrected and all those who believe in him will have eternal life. And yet it is more than this.

Jesus has the power over death. Death still remains, our physical bodies decay, each of us will die. BUT Christ has the power over death. Meaning each of us who believe in him will have life and have it in abundance both here on earth and in heaven with our heavenly father. This story of the raising of Lazarus is Christ's way of revealing his power over death, it is his way of revealing his connection with God. It is important then in the text to notice how dead Lazarus really is, that he is so dead he stinks, as Martha blurts out. Why is this important? So that we don't think that he was merely sleeping. In

the Jewish culture it was commonly believed that the spirit of someone would return to the grave for three days thinking that it might return in to the body; when however the soul sees that the color of its face has changed then it goes away and leaves it. So the fourth day signifies that it is all over, the soul has departed, there is no life. Remember in the Jewish culture soul and life go hand in hand, so when the soul leaves life is gone. So when Jesus raises Lazarus he is truly resurrecting him, raising him from death in to life. Those who have been mourning with Mary and Martha for 3 days have witnessed a miracle beyond miracles and yet some don't believe.

Jesus turns to Martha and asks her a question "do you believe this?" Meaning do you, Martha believe that I am the resurrection and the life? Resurrection is a transformation from the state of being dead to the returning to life. So Jesus is asking if Martha's faith can embrace a belief that Jesus' lordship is over even death itself. In a sense this is Jesus' question to Martha- can you wrap your head around this Martha? Can you believe the truth of this? Can you accept that I am more than just a man, that I am the way, the truth and the life? I am the way of salvation? I have the power to raise the dead back in to life, to literally change the state of one's being; do you believe this, can you believe this, will you believe this? I think that this is still a valid question for us today, can you believe in this miracle. If you can't believe that Christ would have the power to raise Lazarus from the dead, can you really believe that he himself would rise from the dead? Can you believe that Christ is the way of salvation or is Christ simply a good guy, who did some amazing things and is someone whom we should exemplify in our actions, and words by but doesn't really have power over life and death?

According to Jesus in our passage, even a resurrection miracle will not be sufficient to persuade some people of the power and the reality of God. Signs alone cannot provoke faith. Miracles do not of themselves transform lives, we have to believe and respond. This is what Christ is asking of Martha, do you believe, will you allow your life to be transformed by this belief? For many people they fear resurrection even more than death; because they have to give up on their own intent on being their own lord, they have to be willing to allow someone else to be Lord of their life. We have to be willing to allow the transforming power of Christ to take over us and yet it is easier to believe that Christ did some miracles but that's about it, rather than believing the full weight of what it means that Christ is Lord. Lazarus was resurrected from death into life again, this time life in Christ. Christ raised Lazarus to glorify God, to show God's ultimate redeeming power, I think in one way as he was heading to the cross himself, he was pointing his believers to the ultimate possibility that he himself, Christ, who is God can and would be raised in to new life and his followers would then have to believe.

I wonder if it is easier sometimes for us to stay in our comfort zones, to stay content with who we are, to in a sense remain dead to the Gospel of Christ, to chose not to believe that Christ has the power to raise the dead into new life. Sure we hear the message but do not come forth and expect a miracle in our lives, we do not expect that Christ can change our own lives in the way that he changed Lazarus. What are those things in our lives that we need to let die so that they can be resurrected in Christ? Sometimes we need to let go of family relationships that have been hurtful or destructive in our lives in order for God to

heal our hearts and help us build new relationships that bring new life. Maybe we have to let go of addictions, allow them to die in order that Christ might work in our hearts that he may resurrect in us a new life. Maybe we have to let old behaviors of anger, or a bad temper allow those to die that Christ may resurrect in us new behaviors. Maybe we have to allow self loathing or low self esteem to die in order that Christ might resurrect in us new life- a life that is content with who we are, content with the way we are created, the way we look, a life that is happy in the gifts that we have been given and blessed with. Maybe we have to allow our selfishness to die and allow Christ to resurrect in us a sense of compassion and an outward perspective- to see the world through Christ's eyes now, to be ready to say here I am Lord send me to the streets of Novato to serve the youth, or to help hand out food to the homeless, to have the courage to invite a friend to church. Maybe we need to allow the desire to please everyone to die in order that we might seek to please God first and foremost. Maybe we tell ourselves that we have done our share, we have put in our time and now it is someone else's turn- maybe we need to let that language die in us and open our hearts to the way God is calling us to serve in new ways. Maybe we need to let our individualism die and allow Christ to resurrect in us a sense of community. We have to remember that in Christ we are made new creations but we have to be willing to listen to the call and walk out of the tomb, the tomb that is binding us and keeping us from living the life that Christ desires us to live. Maybe we have to let go of our need to control everything in our life and allow others to learn and grow by making mistakes along the way.

Lazarus was dead and yet when he heard his name being called he had a moment to act, to get up and believe that he had been given a new life, to act on what he was hearing or to ignore the voice that was calling him forth from the tomb. The same is true for us. We can ignore the calls of Christ or we can listen to his voice and be changed. However we look at it we have to act. Faith by itself, if it has no works, no fruit, is dead (James 2:13). In other words if we hear the words of Christ, if we believe that Christ has the power to raise the dead and yet our lives do not reflect that truth then we are not fully living a resurrected life.

Christ has the power to transform us as individuals and as a community of faith, but we have to be willing to step out of the tomb, to listen to his calling and to believe that Christ has the power to do a new work in us. So our question today is this, what do you need to die in you so that Christ can begin to do a new work in your life? What do you need to let go of so that Christ can transform you into his new creation?