

Sermon: I Am the Resurrection and the Life

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 26, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Good Old Fred had been a faithful Christian all his life, and was near death, resting peacefully in the hospital. The family called their pastor to be with them. As the pastor stood next to the bed, Fred's condition appeared to deteriorate rapidly, and he motioned frantically for something to write on. The pastor lovingly handed him a pen and a piece of paper, and good old Fred used his last bit of energy to scribble a note, then he died, taking his last breath. The pastor thought it best not to look at the note at that time, so he placed it in his jacket pocket.

At the funeral service, as he was finishing the message, he realized that he was still wearing the same jacket that he wore when Fred died. He said, "You know, good old Fred handed me a note just before he died. I haven't looked at it, but knowing Fred, I'm sure there's a word of inspiration there for us all." He opened the note, and read it out loud to the congregation. It reads, "Move away, you're standing on my oxygen tube!"

Why joke about death? Why joke about such a serious matter, in such a light hearted way? Well, death is the inevitability that we all have to face. Death is the final frontier that we all have to cross. But death is not the end, not for those who proclaim faith in Jesus Christ, who has conquered death on the cross. Death is not the end, for we know that resurrection awaits us. As Apostle Paul proclaimed in the First Epistle to the Corinthians 15:17, "*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins.*" Again in the same chapter, verse 26, "*The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*"

Lectionary reading this week takes us to the Gospel of John, chapter 11, verse 1-45, the story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus. A curious story that involves a curious delay when Jesus first received the news that Lazarus was seriously ill, and near death.

Keeping in mind that Lazarus was described as someone whom the Lord loves, so we can safely rule out 'the lack of care' as an explanation. But why the delay to two days? Why wait until Lazarus was good and properly dead.

Well, Jesus himself said it in verse 4, *“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.”* So that the Son of God may be glorified. Before we go any further, I need to stress the glory of the Son that Jesus referred to, was not praise, but was in fact pointing to his own death. We will come back to that later.

But first, I want to invite you into this story, with the mindset that ‘we do not read the Scripture, but the Scripture read us’. We often get this wrong, in thinking that we are the subject and the Scripture is the object of our study, of our comprehension. It is actually the other way around. The Scripture as inspired by the Spirit of God is the subject, we are the object that are being read.

The easiest way to do this, especially in a well constructed narrative, with multiple characters, is to ask which of those characters in the story do you most identified with? Of the four main characters of Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and the bystanders watching the story unfold, which one do you most identify with, which one draws you deeper into this story.

Would it be **Lazarus**? Lazarus who spoke not a word, who had taken ill and died, who was then brought back to life by Jesus. Lazarus who was simply there, passively receiving this grace of God, incredible as it is, bestowed upon him by the One who loves him. So through him, through this death and resurrection, the Son of God may be glorified. Do you see a bit of Lazarus in you? Not a bad choice if you identify with Lazarus.

How about **Martha**? Do you see a bit of Martha in you? Elsewhere in the Scripture, in another Gospel account of Luke 10, Martha was portrayed as a good host, who worked diligently to prepare a wholesome meal to host not just Jesus but his entire entourage. In her annoyance that Mary, her sister, had chosen not to help out, but to sit quietly by the side of Jesus, Martha complained, and subsequently earned a mild rebuke from Jesus, that Mary had indeed chosen better.

But here in John 11, Martha was seen as respectful, theological, and faithful. She did not let grief dictate her action, as she went out to meet Jesus. She stated the fact that Jesus was late in coming, but there was no hint that she blamed Jesus. In fact, she left open the possibility that God may still give Jesus whatever he asks, without herself asking that her brother be raised.

When challenged by the statement from Jesus that “Your brother will rise again”, Martha again respectfully deferred by saying, “I know that he

will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” In all these, Martha came through as mature and wise, trusting in Jesus in whatever may or may not come. Should you find yourself drawn in by Martha, I say good for you! Your faith is serving you well.

Or perhaps you identify more with **Mary**. Mary who had chosen well to sit by the side of Jesus in Luke 10, comes across here in John 11, as someone who was emotional, who was genuine in her grief.

Mary did not, at first, meet Jesus. But when she heard that, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you”, Mary got up quickly to meet with him. When Mary saw Jesus, she fell at his feet in grief, with a hint of complain, said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She was stating a fact, as she is well aware who Jesus is, the power he has to heal. She may not understand why Jesus was delayed in coming. All she knew and felt was a sense of loss, lost in her own grief. So she wept.

How about the crowd, the **bystanders**, who were watching, observing, critiquing, and finally believing? Do you identify with them? Do they draw you in?

These bystanders, where the Gospel simply identified as the Jews, were sort of in the background, commenting on what transpired before them, with words such as, “See how he loved him!”, or “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Their lack of faith, their unhelpful comments, their weeping, all contributed to verse 35, the shortest verse of the whole Bible, that ‘Jesus wept’. However, we should also keep in mind that some of these bystanders eventually came to believe at the end of the story. That movement from un-faith to faith is what this story is all about, isn’t it?

Whether you are drawn into this story by Lazarus, by Martha, by Mary, or the bystanders, or a combination of them, the seeds of faith are nevertheless planted in all of us, by these words of Jesus: “***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? Do you really? Truly?

The most traumatizing death that I had ministered to, must have been the death of Shu-Lin. She was a good friend of Daisy and I. When I first began ordained ministry at my former charge in Montreal, Shu-Lin was a trusted confidante whom we turned to, for advise, for solace, or for just a friendly ear. She worked, at that time, as the chaplain at the Presbyterian

College, offering her wise words and care to many others as well. Shu-Lin became ill with a rare form of Leukaemia, and fought bravely, a two-year battle against cancer, which she eventually succumbed to.

I had visited her in the hospital a number of times, and tried to comfort her with my limited experience, with words that didn't seem to be much help. You see, Shu-Lin was thoroughly and theologically trained in the matter of 'ministering to those who are dying'—which happens to be the topic of her doctoral thesis.

To make the matter worse, in the depth of her despair when she began to realize the hope of a cure was slipping away, she confessed to me that all her prior trainings and all her faith were for nought, and doubt had overtaken her. I was dumb-founded, lost for words, lost in my own lack of ability to do anything for her.

But she did have an odd request: she did not want a memorial service after her death; she wanted a celebration of life, a service where all her friend and family could gather and say farewell to her.

So I (and a few others) set about organizing such a service, and it was a wonderful experience. Over 100 people came, packing an entire wing of the Montreal General Hospital. We sang, we laughed, we spoke words of hope, of faith, and of life and death, and we prayed. Shu-Lin sat through the whole service, with a smile on her face. She did not say much. That service exhausted her, taking the last bit of her energy she had. She passed away a few days afterward.

I did have one last visit with her after that celebration of life. All she managed to say, was that she was at peace with God, and her faith was intact. Hallelujah! Praise be to God!

Praise be to Christ Jesus who is the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in him, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in him will never die.

The seeds of faith that Jesus planted in the story of the raising of Lazarus, would set the course for him towards the cross, where on that hill of Calvary, Christ will be crucified, then raised and glorified. The power of death is thus no more.

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