

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
I Am the Resurrection and the Life  
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Genesis 1:26-31; John 11:17-27

It was a call of desperation. All the 911 operator could make out was that someone had been kidnapped and was being held for ransom somewhere in Houston. The caller had no idea where they were only that they needed help. The police leaped into action. First, they were able to narrow down the area in which the person was being held hostage by using cell tower data. Then the police and sheriff's officers began scouring the neighborhood. Finally, they located the suspects hideout in a very stable, middle class neighborhood (a block and a half from our son's house). When the raid finally took place, the officers were shocked. They found more than 90 people crammed into two small rooms. The people had not eaten or been given liquid in four days. All these immigrants had paid coyotes to move them across the border from Mexico into Texas, but now the coyotes were holding them hostage in order to extort more money from their families. Those held hostage had no idea what would happen to them if their families did not pay. Those held captive were grateful for the rescue and the kind treatment of the neighbors who brought them food and water, even though it meant being sent back across the border. They had put out a call for help and it had been heard.

We might imagine that Mary and Martha were holding onto the same sort of hope when they called IXII and sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was dying. They hoped Jesus would come quickly and save Lazarus from death. We are not sure why Lazarus was dying. We are not sure why Jesus, who considered Lazarus a friend, did not immediately leave what he was doing and make the short walk to Bethany. And it was a short walk, less than a day's journey. But Jesus did not come on the first day, or the second, or even on the third day. It was not until four days after Lazarus had died and been entombed that Jesus arrived on the scene. And by then it was too late. There was no hope of raising him from the dead. There was no hope because all Jews knew that the spirit of the deceased only hovered around the body for three days. So, by day four, Lazarus was beyond hope, which Martha made clear to Jesus when he finally arrived. Her words were biting. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."

Jesus knew she was right. He knew that if he had come sooner Lazarus would still be alive and there would have been another miracle on Jesus' resume. But since Lazarus was dead, Jesus knew what was expected of him. He was expected to stay for a week and mourn with the family. He was to show compassion and tender care to Mary and Martha. He was to try to comfort them and the friends who came to the wake. Jesus, however, does none of these things. In fact, Jesus seems to make an offhand, rude remark to Martha. "Your brother will rise again." No offense to Jesus, but Martha knew that. Everyone knew that. They all knew that when God's kingdom was launched that all the righteous would be raised to new life. They knew that there would be a general resurrection of the dead. This was the meaning of Daniel's words that, "*Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.*" And though this might be comforting, knowing that Lazarus will rise on the last day, it didn't help ease the pain of the moment...the pain that if Jesus had been there, then Lazarus would still be alive. Jesus was late and he should simply acknowledge his failing.

What Jesus does next flips the script. Jesus flips the script because he makes it clear that he is not late but is instead, early. He is early because the resurrection that was supposed to have occurred at the end of time, at the final consummation of the world, was happening in and through him. *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live. And those that believe in me and live, will never die.”* This claim that Jesus is early with the resurrection has two components; resurrection and life which are intimately connected. This morning I would like to begin with the second, life, and then move on to resurrection. When Jesus speaks of himself as the Life, he is drawing on one of the great themes of the TANAK, the Jewish scriptures. This theme is that God is a God of life, rather than a God of death. God is the one who creates life out of nothing and then declares that life to be very good. God is the one who creates a flourishing creation fit for plants, animals, and human beings. This means that life is precious to God. Life is to be nurtured, protected, and appreciated. Unfortunately, this flourishing of all life was diminished by human beings’ tendency to war, violence, and abuse of the land...remembering that even the land is to be able to rest. So, when Jesus speaks of himself as the Life, he is not only drawing a connection between himself and the creator but is stating that the creator’s desire for full and flourishing life can be found in Jesus’ own being. Jesus is the one who makes the fullness of life possible.

This brings us then to the resurrection. A careful reading of the TANAK makes it clear that God’s desire was for the life to endure; for the life God created to last. Again, unfortunately, human pride, jealousy, arrogance, and idolatry brought death. Human sin destroys what God makes. This destruction then causes human beings to believe that death renders all life meaningless. Why bother being good if we are all going to die? Why bother thinking of anyone else if all we do is forgotten? Why worry about the future of the world when we will not live to see it? If death renders everything meaningless, why bother at all? What Jesus hopes people will see is that the resurrection alters the equation that **death = meaninglessness**. Instead, the equation is to be **resurrection = meaning**. It does so because we are building for a future that we will inherit as those who will be resurrected. We are creating life not only for those who follow us, but for ourselves. For you see, resurrection is not merely a spiritual resurrection, which is step one; but it is a physical resurrection, which is step two. Resurrection means that the life we create here and now will be part of the life we will one day inherit. Thus, the precious life God creates, becomes the precious life that God redeems.

This past week I received my usual number of robo-calls on my cell phone, none of which I answer. Most left no voicemail but one did, which I thought was worth sharing, even if the transcription was not entirely accurate. This was the transcription. *“Hi, this is Bob. We sent you a letter in the mail this week regarding your **death elimination**. So, give us a call thank you.”* My friends, what I hope we will remember this week is that long before Bob sent me a letter in the mail about my death elimination, the Gospel of John sent us a letter about our death elimination; our death elimination in and through Jesus of Nazareth, who is the resurrection and the life. The only question for us is the same one for Martha, do we believe it? Do we believe that in Jesus there is the fullness of life? Do we believe that in Jesus the resurrection gives meaning to our lives and casts out the fear of dying? I hope so because it has for me. It is what gives me the courage to speak here every week and at every memorial service. It is what gives me the courage to work with you all for a better future for this world. It is what gives me hope regardless of what the news brings. My challenge to you for this week is to simply ask yourselves, “Do I believe?” and if you do, to let this belief in Jesus as the resurrection and the life, give your life meaning and purpose for each day that passes.