

If You Had Benn Here

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Pastor Frank Allen

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, FL

John 11:20-37

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21 Martha said to Jesus,

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

24 Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this?”

27 She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately,

“The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

30 Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

31 The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

34 He said, “Where have you laid him?”

They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35 Jesus began to weep.

36 So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

37 But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

#### IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE

I want to look at today’s passage from the standpoint of an accusation. This accusation is the title of my sermon for today. It is that little prepositional phrase filled with anger and regret,

“If you had been here ...”

Martha and then Mary make the same accusation. “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

But, Jesus was not there, and Lazarus died.

In fact Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days when Jesus arrived, and the funeral was still going on. They truly grieved as those who had no hope.

I recognize the accusation in this “if you had been here” statement.

I’ve made the same statement, but not in relation to others. I have hurled this accusation at myself. Several times when a loved one died I was not present. And I said to myself, “If only I had been there ...”

But, I wasn’t there. My grief was intensified by guilt.

I suspect that I'm not alone in this. I bet many of you remember a time when you weren't there at the time of crisis, and you wonder if your presence would have made a difference.

Of course most of the time that guilt is misplaced.

Joan Didion wrote about this in her book entitled, "The Year of Magical Thinking." She thought of all the things she could have done and said to have prevented her husband's untimely death, and in her grief she often did things that were illogical.

For example, she kept her husband's shoes, as he would need them when he returned. She knew this was magical thinking, but she just could not let go.

Of course she had no control over the events leading up to her husband's death. There was nothing she could have done to prevent it. She finally came to this conclusion, but it took a while.

The same is true for us. Grief makes us do some strange things. And it takes a year or two of magical thinking and struggling with our own sense of guilt before we can begin to make a new life for ourselves.

We cannot change the fact that we are mortal. We cannot know what the future holds and change it. On the other hand this is not true when it comes to Jesus.

## JESUS IS LATE

Martha and Mary had a point.

If Jesus had been there, it would have made a difference. Jesus had miraculously healed many people. He could have healed Lazarus.

When Jesus weeps in response to the grief of Mary and the friends of Lazarus, some see this as an expression of love.

But, others are more cynical. They say, "Could not he who opened the eyes of a blind man have kept this man from dying?"

In other words, it was Jesus' fault that Lazarus died. Jesus didn't arrive soon enough.

In fact, earlier in the story Martha and Mary send a messenger to Jesus telling him that Lazarus is ill.

But, Jesus doesn't come.

He says that Lazarus is not going to die, and that God will be glorified through this illness.

Martha and Mary did not see the glory in waiting. Lazarus was dead, and Jesus was not there.

This is why some people lose faith or don't have faith today.

They point to those times when the sick are not healed. They point to those times when evil and injustice triumph.

And they make the same accusation that is made in our passage for today.

They ask,

“Where were you God?  
Why didn't you do something?”

You healed others.  
Why didn't you heal my loved one?”

## RESURRECTION

How does Jesus answer this accusation?

He speaks of resurrection. He tells Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” Jesus says that the end of life does not kill hope for the faithful.

Martha believes this. She believes that when the final trumpet sounds the faithful dead will be raised.

And yet I wonder if that belief in the resurrection at the end of time is a hope that is a bit too distant for comfort in the present.

I imagine that Martha may have made this statement of faith with a sigh and an air of resignation. Yes, at the end of time all will be made right, but that seems like scant comfort now.

But, Jesus makes that hope of resurrection a present reality. He uses the present tense. He says to Martha,

“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.”

The theme of John’s gospel is reinforced once again. Jesus is God in the flesh. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus is eternal and those who live and believe in him share in that eternity.

Once again, note that this is not a future hope. This is a present reality.

This is not just a verse to quote at the graveside (although it is an excellent one to use on that occasion).

This is a verse that we need to hear today.

We live under the grace and power of the Creator here and now. We don’t have to wait for eternity. We are a part of the eternal here and now.

#### A PERCEPTION PROBLEM

Now we won’t always feel that divine closeness. All of us have experienced the dark night of the soul when we thought God was absent from our lives.

And often that absence seemed to occur when we needed God the most.

But, I have come to believe that the problem was not with God. The problem was with our perception. The fog of grief or the pain of present trials clouded our mind.

The truth of the matter is this; God is always with us. God as revealed in Jesus is the source of all life, and even in the most destructive event God is present making new life.

I saw a great example of this on my vacation.

We visited Volcanoes National Park in Hawaii, and I was absolutely overwhelmed by the cooled lava flows. They were huge, and carved out giant swaths in the landscape. We even had the opportunity to hike about a mile on the top of one of those giant flows.

Our guide told us that one of the largest recent flows was preceded by three hours of earthquakes followed by three hours of eruption.

And then it was over.

But, in those brief moments the landscape had been totally changed. Homes and trees had been totally wiped out, and the lava that flowed into the ocean made the big island of Hawaii even bigger.

That's the power of creation at work.

And now just thirty years after the eruption we see trees and plants growing up out of the lava flow. New life springs from the earth.

This is the mechanism that God used to create our world, and there are still places on earth where we can see it.

I couldn't get enough of that place because it was the cradle of life. It was in its own way a holy place.

And according to John when we look at Christ we also see the Creator. Christ is life.

In John, chapter one we read,

“All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being.” (John 1:3)

In other words all of creation is a testimony, a witness to the Savior who also is the Creator.

And that's what makes resurrection a possibility.

## SIGNS OF THINGS TO COME

Jesus, after stating that he was the resurrection and the life asked Martha if she believed that.

Martha did believe in Jesus. She thought that Jesus was the Messiah. She thought that he was the Son of God, a title often used to describe the king of the Jews.

But, I get the impression that she was not quite ready to believe that Jesus was the resurrection and the life, the Creator in the flesh. She would have to see more than she had seen to believe such a lofty thing.

And she would see more. Soon enough the power of creation, and the power of the resurrection would soon be on display for all to see.

But, for now the problem with Martha is that she didn't believe enough. She couldn't see the big picture when it came to Jesus.

The signs were there. He not only said what only God could say; he did what only God could do.

In John's gospel there is a crescendo of power and prophecy, signs that God was in Christ.

Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding party, suggesting the coming of a new kingdom.

Jesus heals an official's son.

Jesus heals an invalid.

Jesus feeds 5,000.

Jesus walks on the sea.

Jesus heals the blind beggar.

And with the raising of Lazarus we see the greatest sign yet. Not even raising the dead is too hard for Jesus. No one has ever done this before.

This is indeed the miracle to end all miracles but this is also the straw that breaks the camel's back.

No one had ever done something like this. And doing it in front of so many people means that the truth can no longer be hidden.

God was in Christ. The Word had become flesh.

This miracle was a source of comfort and joy for Mary and Martha and for many others.

## THE CROSS AND RESURRECTION

But, oddly enough many did not see this as a reason to rejoice. They saw it as a reason to be afraid.

In John's gospel the greatest miracle does not increase faith in some. It gives them a reason to kill Jesus.

From this time on in John's gospel Jesus is on the road to the cross. The authorities plan not only to kill Jesus but to kill Lazarus as well.

They are afraid that if Jesus gets too popular the Roman authorities will take notice. The people will say that Jesus is the Messiah.

And the Romans will respond as they always respond, with brute force. It could spell the end of their nation.

In their minds it would be better for Jesus and Lazarus to die than for a whole nation to be destroyed. The power to give life is the ultimate threat to the powers that be, not only then but now as well.

But, the neither the religious authorities nor the Romans will be successful in their efforts to kill Jesus. The raising of Lazarus foreshadows what we will be talking about in just two weeks, the raising of Jesus.

If God was in Christ, if the Word became Flesh in Jesus then nothing has the power to prevail over Jesus. Death cannot defeat the one who created the heavens and the earth. And the symbol of destruction will become in God's hands the symbol of hope.

## DO WE BELIEVE THIS?

The question we need to answer is the one Jesus posed to Martha. Do we believe this? Do we believe that the power of the resurrection continues today?

Do we believe that the Word is still made Flesh and is still bringing hope to us and to our world? Do take this promise personally?

Or do we believe that we are alone in our struggles? Do we believe that God is not here or at least not interested in helping us?

Sometimes we speak of the raising of Lazarus as a resuscitation instead of a resurrection. This is not to say that the raising of Lazarus was somehow less than a miracle. After all he had been in the grave for four days. He was raised from the dead. It was the miracle to end all miracles.

And yet Lazarus will die again. This miracle will not last forever. That makes his raising something less than a resurrection.

But, the event that this miracle foreshadows will live forever. The Bible tells us that the resurrection of Jesus is a foreshadowing of our future. He is the first fruits of those who will be raised to live forever.

## THE POWER TO UNBIND AND SET FREE

When Lazarus came from the grave still bound by his grave clothes, Jesus told the people to unbind him set him free. And the community empowered by Jesus to unbind and set people free has endured all these years.

We are a community that lives in the light of this miracle. We bring a word of hope into a dark and deadly world. We bring a word of faith to a world that lives by fear.

Tomorrow I will preside at a funeral, and in the face of death and grief I will once again quote the words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life."

I am there to tell those who grieve that God is still with them. He has been with them all along.

These words bring us comfort in good times and in bad. Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

In Jesus we see the human face of God, a God who cries for us and with us in our time of need. We see a God who never leaves us.

We see a God who goes where no one else dares to go and dreams what no one else dares to dream. And in Jesus we see the hope for new life that only the Creator can give.

I can trust a God like that.

So, to those who feel alone and abandoned this day I say, "God is here." Not only that God is with us and for us. Jesus tells us, "I am the resurrection and the life." And eternity begins now.

Amen.