



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – September 23, 2007

Lazarus

Dr. David L. Bartlett

John 11:1-44

1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it, he said, "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." 5 Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6 after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10 But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." 11 After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." 12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." 13 Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. 15 For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20 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?" 38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

I

It is the one verse we all learned in Sunday School. It is featured on placards held by eager fans behind the goal posts at football games. Driving through the south, at least, you can find it prominently displayed on the billboard beside you and on the bumper sticker ahead of you:

John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

John 3:16 was one of the favorite verses at the Baptist church camp where I went as a youth. Each night before turning out the lights, each camper was supposed to recite a favorite verse, and John 3:16 was right up there just after that unlikely favorite of adolescent Baptist boys: "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

And we thought we knew what the text meant. It was a verse about what happens when you die. If you die as a believer in Jesus you enter into heaven—eternal life. If you die without believing in Jesus you enter into—well the polite way of saying it is: You perish.

It was only years later when I actually had to read the Gospel of John through from beginning to end that I discovered this. In John's Gospel the promise of eternal life is indeed the promise of life with God when we die. But even more important-- for John's Gospel "eternal life" is a way of talking about what the faithful life now looks like.

Eternal life is life that is touched by God's eternity. It is life here and now that at the same time manifests beauty and hope and astonishing love.

One of the best descriptions of eternal life as John understands it was written by the poem e.e. cummings, who may not have known that he was writing about eternal life:

i thank you God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(I who have died am alive again today;
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of all the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my eyes awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)¹

That is eternal life. That is the life Jesus offers again and again in John's Gospel, and if we are to believe that Gospel that is the eternal life that Jesus continues to offer again and again and again and from place to place, from then until now and from the wedding feast at Cana to the morning worship in New Canaan.

Eternal life is the life where we who feel as though we've died can live again. The life where we human beings no longer doubt the unimaginable God. The life where, at last, the ears of our ears awake and the eyes of our eyes are opened.

II.

John's Gospel from first to last is the story of a great gift. Eternal life. And from first to last it is the story of the great giver, the unimaginable God who reaches out in the life of the tasting, touching, seeing, breathing Christ to lift us from the no of all nothing.

The story of John's Gospel is the story of people who almost miss the gift. Who have eternal life offered them and almost turn foolishly away.

Nicodemus, the first man ever to hear John 3:16, before it was John 3:16, almost turns away. He is so important, so busy, a teacher of Israel, a leader of his community a member of the synagogue council. Probably a devoted husband and a pushy father. How could he possibly stop in the midst of his busyness to accept the gift of eternal life? "You'd have to be born again, says Jesus. You'd have to start all over again."

I'm late for a meeting says Nicodemus, and heads out the door.

The man who lies by the pool of Bethzatha almost turns away from eternal life. "Do you want eternal life?"

Jesus asks. "Well," he says, "it seems like a lot of work. I'd have to get up off this comfortable palate, find some hidden store of energy in my general lethargy, and do something about it."

¹ Sonnet 65, Poems:1923-1954 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World)1968, p.464

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” says Christ, “Get up and walk. Walk right into eternal life.”

(now at last the ears of the man’s ears awake and now the eyes of his eyes are opened.)

III.

And most conspicuously, Martha almost misses eternal life--Martha the sister of Mary and of Lazarus and Jesus’ main conversation partner in the passage we’ve read this morning.

Now I know that at one level the story of the raising of Lazarus is about bringing a dead man back to life.

But the main point of the story is bringing a dead man back to life. Not off to heaven, that’s yet to come. But not back to the grave either, out into the astonishing beauty of the daily world. Lazarus could sing e.e. cummings’ song:

(I who have died am alive again today;
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of all the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

IV.

But here’s the thing. If Jesus had paid attention to Martha, Lazarus would have stayed in the tomb. Because if there is one thing you can say about Martha in the whole New Testament it is that she is a very practical person, and if there’s one thing you say about eternal life it is that it is not a very practical idea.

In fact the very practical Martha reminds us of our very practical selves, because when we’re faced with the promise of new life, eternal life, we have a number of excuses—just like Martha.

Here’s the first excuse. “If only.” Martha meets Jesus on the road. “Lord if only you had been here my brother would not have died.”

Listen, Jesus, if only I’d had more sympathetic parents or more manageable kids; if only I’d got that job I always wanted; if only I hadn’t had to settle for second tier college; if only I’d got that promotion; if only my spouse would take a fair share of the family responsibilities; come to think of it if only I had

married so and so or if only I hadn’t married you know who—

“If only, Jesus...I’d be ready for life.”

That is our most pervasive response to the promise of life and our most pointless, too. Of all the words of tongue and pen the saddest are what might have been, and the silliest, too.

Because the promise of new life comes to the Martha who really is Martha, grieving the real loss of her brother.

And the promise of new life comes to the you who is really you—with those parents and those kids, that marriage or lack of marriage, that promotion or failure to be promoted, that faith or lack of faith.

The promise isn’t to some imaginary you who might have been. The promise is to you.

George Lindbeck who taught at Yale Divinity School for many years was asked by an eager reporter what he would do differently if he could start his life over again.

“At my age,” (which is in the eighties now). At my age, he said, it would be silly to try to answer that question.”

It would be silly, he said, because we can’t live life over and it would be silly because if God is God, since God is God, God has used my life and not some other life to bring me to this place.

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

V.

That takes care of that objection, but not of Martha’s skepticism. Jesus said to her: “Your brother will rise again.” And Martha says, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

A new form of resistance. Now not “If only” but “it’s too soon.” Thanks for the nice words Jesus; I certainly am in favor of eternal life and I suppose that:

When I die I’ll have it. Or when I retire. Or when I get the job I’ve been waiting for or the house I’ve been

saving for or get far enough ahead that I can actually stay home from time to time with the family. Of course I'm in favor of eternal life, but not yet. It's too soon.

One of the best friends of my youth spent the years of his young adulthood always vaguely dissatisfied. He was well educated, well employed, had lots of friends. But one thing was missing: the wife of his dreams.

"When I get married," he'd say. "Then my life will all be all right."

So of course he got married; and of course he loaded on that poor woman all the devices and desires of his heart and of course, since she actually wasn't God, she wasn't good enough to do it all.

"It's too soon," says Martha. "At the end of time or maybe even the day after tomorrow I know there will be eternal life."

"Martha, Martha," says Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life. Right here. Right now."

The theologian Paul Tillich says that what God offers us is always the Eternal Now. Not tomorrow, not some day in the indefinite future. Now.

"I thank you God for most this amazing day...
(*now* the ears of my ears awake
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

VI.

If only...it's too soon. And then of course the most familiar complaint of all: "It's too late."

Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days."

It's too late. At my life with all my disappointments and my irreversible errors and my irrevocable failures: let's face it Jesus, it's too late.

My life may have started out full of promise. But now at last, it's not only dead and gone, it's been dead so long that it's beginning to stink.

It's too late.

So Jesus says one more thing:
"Martha, Martha, didn't I tell you that if you had faith you would see the glory of God?"

If you had faith...the great theme of John's Gospel.
"God so loved the world that he sent his only son that whoever had faith in him might have life, real life."

Enough Martha, enough puzzling and postponing and evading and avoiding.
Have faith, Martha.

Trust me; for God's sake. Trust me.

"Did I not tell you that if you had faith you would see the glory of God?"

"those who have died are alive again today;
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and of wings..."

She's quiet at last. No more: "If only" and no more "it's too soon" and no more "it's too late", silenced at last dear Martha waits in faith.

Jesus cried out with a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out.":

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

Jesus said to the crowd: "Free him, and let him go."

To Christ be thanks and praise. **Amen.**