

Scripture Reading for Sunday Nov 11th 2018

Isa 65: 17, 19b-20a, 23-25

“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. The sound of weeping and of crying will be heard no more. Never again will there be an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child. They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.

John 11:17-27 (NIV)

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

Sermon: “I am the Resurrection and the Life!”

The well-known story of “the raising of Lazarus” evokes various responses. Perhaps the obvious question that first comes to many people’s mind is, “Did this *really* happen?” If you are predisposed to believe miracles are *impossible*, then raising someone from the dead will *always* be problematic and you will, therefore, dismiss the story as a whole. But even if you believe that miracles are possible, raising someone from the dead can strike you as implausible. John’s gospel is the only one to recount the raising of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha.¹ Even so, Mark and Luke give other examples of Jesus raising the dead.² There is no more reason to reject this story than to reject any of the other miracle stories of Jesus. But in John’s gospel in particular, miracles are always *signs* and therefore we should be asking ourselves what does the raising of Lazarus *signify*? That becomes clear as we follow the exchange between Jesus and Martha.

¹ Many allow the personalities of Mary and Martha to be shaped by Luke’s description of them (see Luke 10:38–42).

² See Mark 5:21-24, 35-43; Luke 7:11-17; 8:49-56.

Mary and Martha had sent a message to Jesus telling him that his dear friend Lazarus was sick. They naturally expected Jesus to come rushing to heal him; but he did not, and Lazarus died. When he eventually arrived, Lazarus had been dead for *four* days. In popular Jewish belief that time, the soul hovered around the body and the grave for three days after death hoping to re-enter the body. But after that time, once the soul has witnessed the physical changes in the corpse, the soul departed for good. Consequently, the reported four-day period since Lazarus had died underscores the *finality* of death.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him.³ “Lord,” she said, “if only you had been here, my brother would *not* have died.”⁴ That phrase, “if only” is one with which we can all identify. If only I had studied harder. If only they had fastened their seat belt. If only I had spoken up when I had the chance. If only the doctor had diagnosed it earlier. If only my prayer had been answered. In “if only” there is a tone of regret, lost hope, and of the inability to put back the clock. Even so, Martha is not moaning or reprimanding Jesus as her next sentence displays her profound faith and hope *in* Jesus as a healer; she says: “But I know that *even now God will give you whatever you ask.*”⁵ Even in the face of the finality of death, Martha expected Jesus was able to *do* something. Jesus responds, “Your brother will rise again.”⁶ This seems intentionally open-ended and therefore susceptible to misunderstanding. Did Martha believe what he had told her? Martha replies, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day”⁷ and this, at least, gave her some sense of comfort and hope.

It is worth reminding ourselves that Jews have not always believed in the resurrection at the “Day of the Lord.” Indeed, the Sadducees in Jesus day did *not* believe in the resurrection.⁸ But for the last 2-3 hundred years, since the time of Daniel,⁹ belief in the resurrection had become widespread among the Jews - not least through the influence of the Pharisees. Even so, until Judgement Day, when God finally puts the world to right, the Jews believed the dead reside in *Sheol*. *Sheol* was literally a God-forsaken place, but *not* a place of torture, rather it was the land of the shades or shadows. Regardless of your moral character, everyone went to *Sheol*, where they existed as a vague shadow; strengthless and joyless. Obviously, not a place over-flowing with hope – unlike the future hope expressed by the prophet Isaiah!¹⁰

Martha, then, believes in the general resurrection of the dead at the culmination of history. But she could not really understand what that might mean - no more than any other disciple could understand it before Jesus had risen from the dead. What Jesus says next is stunning: “*I am the resurrection and the life*. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in

³ John 11:20.

⁴ John 11:21.

⁵ John 11:22. *Lament* is a legitimate Jewish response in such circumstances, but even lament does not imply doubt.

⁶ John 11:23.

⁷ John 11:24.

⁸ See Acts 23:6-7; Mark 12:18.

⁹ See Dan 12:2. (The Pharisees prior belief in the resurrection facilitated some to later become Christians – including Paul; see Acts 15:1,5.)

¹⁰ Isa 65: 17-5; see also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/%E2%80%9CHe-Descended-to-the-Dead%E2%80%9D.pdf>

me will never die.”¹¹ Profound and jaw-dropping as those words are - then and now - on their own they mean little. If I were to proclaim them, you would pity my family and send me to the psych-ward! The act of raising Lazarus from the dead is, then, a *sign* that supports this bold claim of Jesus. But what does it all mean?

Earlier, John speaks of the *authority* of Jesus - just as we have seen in Mark’s gospel over the months. After Jesus heals on the Sabbath we read Jesus said, “My Father is still working and I also am working. . . . The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, *just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes*. . . . Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”¹² That is the *kind* of authority that God the Father has given the Son - particularly with reference to the final resurrection.¹³

The raising of Lazarus is, then, a climax in a series of miraculous signs that Jesus performs. Following the feeding of the 5000, Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life”¹⁴; he said “I am the Light of the World”¹⁵ in the context of giving sight to a man born blind. And now Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life” and then raises Lazarus from the dead. These statements don’t just identify who Jesus is with respect to people, but also his intimate connection with God the Father. They are manifestations of the presence and power of God that, in this last case, reveals that Jesus even has supremacy over death itself. The raising of Lazarus, then, signifies that what God’s promises in the final resurrection is *already being realized in the here and now* amid the ordinariness of life, which includes illnesses and death. Jesus in saying “I am the resurrection and the life” identifies *himself* the fulfillment of those end-time expectations. And John also uses this incident to anticipate Christ’s own death and resurrection, though – unlike Lazarus – Jesus was raised never to die again.

Jesus amplifies his (“I am”) claim further, saying: “The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.”¹⁶ For Jesus to be *the resurrection* means that physical death is not the ultimate end; our future is determined by *our faith in Jesus* not by death itself.¹⁷ Jesus unfolds the saving implications of that claim by adding, “Whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”¹⁸ For Jesus to be *the life* means that we are to live in present fearless of the finality of death because “eternal life” – life in God’s presence - has *already begun*.¹⁹

¹¹ John 11:25,26a.

¹² John 5:17,20-21,25.

¹³ For the overall context see John 3:31-36; 5:19-29; 6:36-40; 8:51; 14:19.

¹⁴ John 6:35,48,51.

¹⁵ John 8:12; 9:5.

¹⁶ John 11:25.

¹⁷ Jesus makes a potent Christological claim that redefines the traditional Jewish eschatological expectations.

¹⁸ John 11:26a.

¹⁹ See John 3:16, 36; 5:24;6:47; 10:28; 17:2. This does not mean we do not *grieve*, for that is denial. However, the church’s experience the life of faith is grounded in the affirmation that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

The custom of waking soldiers to a bugle call dates back to the Roman legions. When bugle calls were reintroduced in modern times, it was a special call to wake up the troops at dawn. This is known as the “Reveille.” It is a bright and cheerful call to rouse soldiers from their slumber ready for duty. Its use in Remembrance Day services also signifies an awaking in a better world – on that last great Day of the Lord, when evil is finally defeated and God puts the world to right with justice and mercy.²⁰ The Last Post and the Rouse (or Reveille) signify death and resurrection. And the hope of the latter is because of Jesus Christ.

It has often been said that as historians look back on the 2nd World War, the key turning point in Europe was the Allied landings in Normandy on June 6th 1944. This is not to belittle the earlier campaigns in North Africa or Italy, in which my father-in-law fought - nor the northern front in Russia. But something decisively *new* was needed if further progress was to be made in Europe. The Allies put a monumental effort in the Normandy landings; if establishing and maintaining that beachhead succeeded, then an important new battle front could be opened. If it failed, the Allies were doomed. The D-Day landings were very costly in terms of human life; but their success effectively guaranteed the ultimate victory – so historians say. Of course, that did not mean that the war was over; many costly battles followed. And no one knew *when* the war in Europe would eventually end; nevertheless, the final outcome was assured. It was a matter of time. While no analogy is perfect, many have compared the beachhead landings in Normandy to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of his resurrection, the ultimate defeat of evil is guaranteed, even though we still have a tough time today with the ongoing effects of evil in its many forms.

I said at the beginning that the question we often ask over the raising of Lazarus is, “Did this really happen?” After Jesus’ bold claims, he asked Martha a different question, “Do you *believe* this?”²¹ The claim to which Jesus invites Martha to believe is that God is present in Jesus and that he has decisively altered human experience of life and death. “Do you *believe* this?” is the critical question for us on this Remembrance Day. If we really believe what Jesus said, it will transform the way we *live* because *death* itself – the *sign* of evil – has been decisively overcome. Martha responds with a confession of faith, “Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”²² By using those titles of Jesus, she acknowledges that all these Jewish end-time expectations have been fulfilled in the present in the man who addressed her - Jesus. “Do we *believe* this?” On this Remembrance Day, let us embrace Jesus as the resurrection and the life, not only in times of death, but also in the daily moments of life. And let us live in the faith and hope that were evident in Martha. Amen.

²⁰ Due to its shorter length, the *Rouse* is most commonly used in conjunction with *The Last Post* at Remembrance Services.

²¹ John 11:26b.

²² John 11:27. This needs to be seen as on a par with that of Thomas (John 20:28).