

It's A Matter of Death and Life!
5th Sunday of Lent
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John 11:17–27, 38–53

Introduction

Martha probably lost track of the number of times friends hugged her and said, "Your brother will rise again." Then comes Jesus and He says the same thing: "Your brother will rise again." Choking back a sob she says, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day." But that sure seems a long time away and doesn't give her much comfort for the here and now.

I. Will Live and Never Die

In response Jesus makes one of the seven "I am" statements recorded in the Gospel of John. (John 11:25-26) Jesus says to her, ***"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."***

Jesus says two things here. First, He makes a promise about the resurrection of the body: ***"He who believes in me though he dies, yet shall he live."*** Jesus says, someday you will be resurrected and be brought back to life.

Secondly, Jesus makes a statement about continued existence of life: ***"Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."*** The person who believes in Jesus keeps right on living, even after physical death never to die again. Here's a reminder that physical death is not the most important thing nor the worst thing or even the final thing that can happen to a believer.

For the unbeliever, death is the end. But not so for the person who is in Christ. Such a person may die in the sense that they pass through the door we call physical death, but that person shall never die in truest sense. Instead, after physical death that person keeps right on living. True believers have already died and been made alive through the waters of baptism. Our trust and hope and faith are in Jesus and we have already begun to experience eternal life. This life cannot be touched by death.

As far as Martha is concerned, this is something new, something wonderful, something she has never heard before. Being taught from the Old Testament Scriptures, Martha believed that her brother Lazarus was in Sheol or Hades. Sheol and Hades are general words for the grave or the shadowy domain where the souls of dead people go — without distinguishing between people who go to heaven and people who go to hell. Sheol and Hades do not say anything about eternal bliss or punishment. They are merely other ways of saying "death" or "the realm of the dead."

Let me give you some examples. Do you remember what Jacob said when he thought Joseph was dead? He said, ***"in mourning will I go down to Sheol to my son"*** (Gen 37:35). Do you remember when David's son was taken by the Lord because of David's sin of adultery and murder against Uriah? David cried out, ***"I will go to him, but he will not return to me"*** (2 Sam 12:23). David thought of his baby son as being in Sheol.

I think too of the question that Job asked of his friends. ***"If a man dies, will he live again?"*** (Job 14:14). Job asked this after he has lost his cattle, his servants, his children. He asked this after his less than comforting friends insisted that he must have greatly sinned against God. ***"If a man dies, will he live again?"***

In the Hebrew text Job actually asked whether one who dies physically still lives. He wonders if life continues after death. He wonders if there is more to life than the present existence we have. Could it be that what we call death is only a change, a transition? If a person dies, is he still living?

Job's question was never answered by his friends. It was not answered until 2000 years later when Jesus spoke to Martha by the grave of her brother: In John 11:25-26 Jesus said to her, ***"I am***

the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

Old Testament believers, then, thought of the souls of the dead as going to Sheol or Hades. New Testament believers have been given far greater insight than this. In His parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus teaches that the dead are found in two entirely different places. The redeemed of the Lord are carried to the bosom of Abraham whereas the damned are in the torments of hell. Stephen, the disciple of Jesus, spoke of going to Jesus when he died. He said, "**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit**" (Acts 7:59). Remember, also, the words of Jesus to the thief on the cross? Jesus said, "**today you will be with me in paradise**" (Luke 23:43). And, with Jesus last breath He said, "**Father, into your hands I commit my spirit**" (Luke 23:46). In line with all of this, we in see in the New Testament that the spirits of departing believers are alive and with God or with Christ the moment they die.

We know that someday, unless Jesus returns, we too will experience physical death. None of us has ever looked behind the dark curtain of death. So we have no real idea of what we will see or experience on the other side of the cross. But remember, death is the final enemy of God's people (1 Corinthians 15:26). So, leaving this earthly plane and entering the unknown can be frightening for many people.

When fear of death attacks us, Jesus does to us what He once did to the Apostle John on Patmos: He places His hand on us and says, like He did in Revelation 1:17-18 "**Do not be afraid. I am the Alpha and Omega the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.**"

"You need not worry about going into that place," He says. "I was there, and I came back. And I have the keys. That place is in under my power. I am alive, and you are mine. And I won't let you out of my sight, not even to Hades."

Believers, then, will live and never die. Forever and ever, beginning right now, beginning the moment you are born anew in the waters of baptism. For you live with Jesus. "**He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.**"

II I Am the Resurrection and the Life

On this 5th Sunday in Lent I want you to take note of Jesus' basis for saying this. This is where the first part of our text becomes important. Jesus says, "**I am the resurrection and the life.**" I mentioned earlier that this is one of the seven "I am" statements made by Jesus that John records in his gospel. Each of the seven statements brings forth an important aspect of the person and ministry of Jesus. Think of how much each of the statements has added to our understanding of Jesus:

I am the bread of life (6:35,48; cf 6:41,51)

I am the light of the world (8:12)

I am the door (10:7,9)

I am the good shepherd (10:11,14)

I am the resurrection and the life (11:25)

I am the way, and the truth, and the life (14:6)

I am the vine (15:1,5)

"I am," as I have said before, recalls the words of God to Moses out of the burning bush: "I AM WHO I AM." As such, by each of these statements Jesus tells us about His mission: to bring life, to be light, to be the door, to lay down His life for the sheep. And, by each of these statements Jesus also tell us about His person: He is God and part of the divine triune Godhead.

"I am the resurrection and the life." Notice, Jesus doesn't merely tell us about life, He is the life. He not only speaks of and gives us the resurrection, He is the resurrection.

"I am the resurrection and the life." Think of what Jesus is telling us here. Jesus is telling us it is in His power to give life and to overcome death. It is in His power to give life and to raise a dead body from the grave. It is in His power because He is the great "I am" Who holds all power in His hands.

We see this great power displayed in our Scripture reading, don't we?! The great "I am" Who is the resurrection and the life, called Lazarus out of death, out of the grave, out of the tomb. He has done this same great thing at every believer's funeral He has attended. He has the habit of finishing funerals with resurrections.

"I am the resurrection and the life." This means that it is only in Jesus, it is only in union with Jesus, by being in Jesus, that we can get life and resurrection.

III Do You Believe This?

Did you notice how Jesus ends His statement? He says, **"Do you believe this?"** If you were to die tonight and appear before the Lord Jesus Christ and He asked you the same question He asked Martha, what would you say?

Before I tell you what Martha said, let's consider the choices. First, a person could say, "No, I don't believe that. I don't believe that You are the resurrection and the life." Many people are quite comfortable admitting that they don't believe that Jesus gives eternal life to all who trust in Him.

Some of these do not believe in the deity of Jesus, the sinfulness of man, or life everlasting. Obviously they don't believe Jesus gives eternal life to those who trust in Him.

Others don't believe in Jesus as the only way of eternal life. They may think there are a lot of ways, a lot of choices and gods. Or they think that they must add something of their own to what He has done. They think they need to partner with God by offering a prayer of acceptance, a confession of sins then penance to pay the spiritual price necessary or promising to be good, trying to obey the Golden Rule, and so on.

And still others just don't care. They disregard their soul, the after life, and Jesus. They live without any thought of eternity. They are only concerned about the here and now. That probably describes most of our secular neighbors and our nation today as a whole. These people don't believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

The second choice is that a person could say, "Yes, I believe that. I believe that You are the resurrection and the life." I know that Jesus Christ died on the Cross for my sins, paying the price in full. I trust Him alone. And, since He promises eternal life to all who believe in Him, I know that I have eternal life. Yes, I believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and acknowledge Him to be the Lord.

So let's get back to Martha. Did she answer "No," "Yes," or "I don't know"? Here are her words: **"Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world"** (John 11:27). She said yes! Not no!

These words of Martha do not always receive the attention they should. Whenever the church thinks of Martha she tends to think of the time Jesus had to admonish her for being anxious and troubled about many things (Luke 10:41ff). But Martha with all her faults was a woman of faith. She agrees with what Jesus has said. She is not choosing her own way.

How did Jesus respond to Martha's answer? Did He rebuke her for her faith? Absolutely not! Instead, the Lord accepted her profession as genuine. Let's leave Martha and take a look at

ourselves. After all, that is why these words are recorded in God's Holy Word. "Do you believe this?" Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? You have only two choices: "Yes" or "No."

Winston Churchill chose not to reject faith. Churchill arranged his own funeral. There were stately hymns in St. Paul's Cathedral and an impressive liturgy. But at the end of the service, Churchill had something unusual planned. When they said the benediction, a bugler high on one side of the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral played Taps, the universal signal that the day is over and the night has come. There was a long pause. Then a bugler on the other side played Reveille, the military wake-up call.

It was Churchill's way of communicating that, while we say "Good night" here, it's "Good morning" up there. Why would he do that? Because he believed in Jesus Christ. Winston Churchill knew where he stood. He stood right by Martha. He believed that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Therefore, He could look forward to the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Therefore, he knew he would keep on living even if his body died.

You see faith in Jesus is a matter of death and life, life eternal the gift from God in Christ Jesus. For in Christ Jesus all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit and you have been given eternal life. You have His (✝) word on it, in Jesus name, Amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN.