

I am the Resurrection and the Life

John 11:17-27, 38-44

Two years ago this very week I arrived in Mt. Airy, and I remember preaching that day about the elephant in the room. Namely, that I was to be your interim pastor for a period of six months. The previous week Pastor Ferry was here, and that week I was now in the pulpit. Then six months turned into a year or so, and you called me to be your pastor on a permanent basis. Now one year has turned into two years. And something has stood out to me that entire time. From the very first week I was here to this very week that has just passed. God is at work.

That awareness was so encouraging to me when I came here. God was at work, even through the ordinary and routine things that I did as I went about my ministry among you, both publicly and from house to house. God was at work, even in the difficulties you as a church experienced during that time of very hard transition. God was at work in your families, in your lives. And it was easy for me to be an instrument, because I experienced so clearly that it is God who does the work. My encouragement was that he had determined to use me as his instrument. In one sense, with all appropriate humility, all I had to do was show up for work.

I continue to see God's hand at work, the hand of his power. To acknowledge the obvious, I see more empty seats than I would like, and that can be discouraging. But I also see in each of you, in all of you, the evidence and experience of God's hand at work. Sometimes, often, that work is in the midst of difficulty, and struggle. But even then, perhaps especially then, as I minister the gospel to you in that context, there is the awareness and the consciousness that God is at work.

God is at work to bring to life those who are dead in sin. God is at work to bring to repentance those who are given to their sin. God is at work to bring peace where there is strife and conflict, to bring hope where there might be despair, to bring strength in weakness, joy in sorrow. And to bring humility where there is pride.

Surely God is not done with that work. And surely as an instrument, as a minister of the gospel, I have a lot of work to do, proclaiming that gospel publicly and from house to house. That is as evident to me today as it was two years ago, if not even more so. But I'll tell you what I see as I look out upon this congregation of God's people, you who have so very good to me and to my family these past two years. I see a lot of trouble, but with the encouragement of your willingness to live openly and humbly as you share many of those troubles with me, I see the God at work. As I go about my work as a pastor, I see the power of the gospel at work. And so I proclaim that gospel to you even today.

In fact, today we come to what could well be identified as the very center and core of the gospel. Namely, the resurrection from the dead. Listen to the Apostle Paul's own summation of that gospel,

1 Cor. 15:1 "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve."

So this comes "first of all." "...that Christ died for our sins

according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” And Paul emphasizes just how important that is,

1 Cor. 15:14 "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. 15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. 16 For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. 17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! 18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.”

So it all hangs on this one thing. Everything is dependent upon the truth and the reality of the resurrection of the dead. Beginning with Jesus’ resurrection. Because if Jesus is not risen, then “you are still in your sins.”

To the contrary, however, Jesus has been raised from the dead, and I will take time next Sunday to focus upon that great doctrine and historical reality as there is so much awareness of Easter Sunday all around us. In a real sense, every Lord’s Day is a celebration of the resurrection, commemorating Jesus’ own resurrection on that first day of the week, connected in our calendars by the Old Testament observance of the passover, connected to the first full moon after the spring equinox. So despite the snow today, spring has arrived in our calendars. And thus the timing of the passover, which was the occasion of Jesus’ crucifixion on Friday, the day before the Jewish sabbath, and then his resurrection on the first day of the week, now the Christian sabbath. That’s why there is a special awareness of the resurrection this week.

So as we live in this world, we live with hope. The hope of life.

And no more triumphant words have ever been written,

1 Cor. 15:51 “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In our text from John today, we have a preview of Jesus’ resurrection. And the context is obvious, and understandable. The context is death, which in our experience is,

I. A CRISIS OF FAITH.

In other words, the reality of death challenges our faith. The reality of death challenges the goodness of God, even, for some, the reality of God. Because death causes grief. Death is unnatural. Death is not what mankind was designed to experience. When God breathed into Adam the breath of life, he was alive, and intended to remain alive. As the Bible says so succinctly, “it was very good.”

Gen. 1:31 “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.”

It was very good at that point, because there was no death. Death would only come if there was sin, only if Adam and Eve sinned against God. And they knew the consequences of such sin,

Genesis 2:15 “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

But for Mary and Martha, death still stung. And they were believers! They knew Jesus. And they believed in him. That was obvious. But still they endured,

A. The crisis of death.

As I stressed last week, that was Jesus’ intention. He waited to come to the house of his friends until after Lazarus died.

v.1-6

We pick up today in,
v.17-21

There is the crisis. There is the pain. There is the confusion.
v.21 “Now Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Death hurts. Let’s broaden that a bit. All of the consequences of sin hurt. All of the consequences of living in a fallen world, subject to the curse of death, hurt. Everything that causes a loss hurts. Grief hurts. Conflict hurts. Rejection hurts. Anger, abuse, persecution, trials, loneliness, disappointment, sorrow—it all hurts. And in one sense, all of those things can become a crisis of faith. “If God were here, if Jesus was here, this struggle wouldn’t have happened?”

The trouble with such a crisis, however, is that what we long for we have to wait for. So death remains. We remain mortal and

corruptible people. We remain sinful people, and we remain under the general sentence of death in this fallen world. It is the curse.

And that curse will be removed at the last day. The very definition of heaven is not the foundation of jewels, the gates of pearl, the streets of gold or the sea of glass, but the removal of all grief and sorrow.

Rev. 21:4 “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” 5 Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”

That’s heaven. That’s eternal glory. No more death!

1 Cor. 15:54 “So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”

But until then, there will be a crisis of faith, the crisis of death. There will be the experience of life that seem to contradict the very hope and presence of the power of God.

v.21 “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”

In that crisis, Martha didn’t lose her faith.

v.22

So it is for her still,

B. A matter of faith.

Crisis, yes. But faith still triumphs. And that’s why Jesus came in the first place. Not simply so that Lazarus could get

better, but so that the faith of these dear friends would grow and mature. And we saw that goal so clearly last week,

v.4 “When Jesus heard that, He said, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

Jesus was full of compassion, even sharing in their grief. We told in verse 35 that he wept. And he had something to teach them, something to encourage their faith.

v.23

Martha agrees. Again, despite this crisis, her faith is intact.

v.24

Also, v.27

That’s the context for one of the most important declarations of the gospel anywhere in Scripture. Important, because it articulates the central hope of the gospel, the hope of life. The hope of freedom from the curse of death. And Jesus pins that hope squarely upon himself. Jesus himself is,

II. THE PROMISE OF HOPE.

It is another of the many statements that being, “I am...” And here, as he confronts the death of Lazarus, as he weeps and grieves with Mary and Martha, he makes himself perfectly clear.

v.25-26

So,

A. Jesus is the power over death.

Lazarus will rise at the last day. That is true. But that is still simply a proposition, a doctrine, if you will. The resurrection is presented and believed as a doctrine, one that we can proclaim and believe as well. “I believe in the resurrection from the dead...”

But it’s more than a doctrine. It’s more than just something you believe, because it is actually power. The resurrection is actually power, power over death. And that power is not found in you, nor in what you might or might not believe. That power is found in Jesus. “I am the resurrection.” “I am the life.”

Here is the doctrine, as we would define it with our Shorter Catechism, correctly expounding what Scripture teaches, “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory, and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.”

But that doctrine is true, and that promise of hope is certain, because Jesus is the resurrection! By definition. His very identity. “I am the resurrection.”

This, then, is the promise and hope of the gospel. “He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” Death is not the end of the story, physical death. The separation of body and soul, which is a very helpful definition of death, is not the last chapter to be written. An obituary isn’t the final word. “He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” Live again. “I am the resurrection.”

Back to,

1 Cor. 15:20 "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead.”

Only Jesus, as God, has such power, power over death. And therefore, only he can give life.

B. Jesus is the power of life.

“I am the resurrection and the life.”

Again, not just a doctrine, but an experience. An experience of power. This is how he puts it in our text, v.26

So actually, when you full understand the meaning of death, a believer “shall never die.” The book of Revelation calls that the “second death.”

Listen to this marvelous promise in,

Rev. 20:6 “Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.”

A quick explanation. I believe that the first resurrection is the resurrection of the believer when he is saved, when he is born again, brought from spiritual death to life. The first resurrection. And the first death would be physical death, something from which none of us will escape. And the second death is that eternal condemnation of the wicked in hell. And those who experience the first resurrection shall not experience the second death. “They shall never die!” That is the ultimate promise of hope.

v.26 “And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

One more thing, however. A miracle. A sign and wonder, performed to demonstrate the truth and the reality of what Jesus has just declared. In other words, he is still in the home of two grieving sisters who brother has died. And in one sense, words themselves are meaningless, empty. So Jesus demonstrates that his words are not empty at all, but full of power. So he gives us,

III. THE DEMONSTRATION OF POWER.

Power. That’s what its all about. Power over the one thing that leaves every man powerless. Death.

So Jesus had work to do.
v.38-44

Just a couple thoughts about that great miracle. Note again the reference to the glory of God.
v.40

And what is that glory? Well, power—supernatural power. Divine power. The power of life over death. In fact, the...

A. Resurrection from the dead is the essence of the glory of God.

As I said last week, the fulness of the glory of God is displayed by the work of Jesus who was raised from the dead himself for our justification. Jesus waited until Lazarus was dead so that he could raise him from the dead! The revelation of that glory is what this passage is all about!

When you read about this miracle, when you imagine the scene in your own mind, when you consider the reality of the resurrection itself, all of the focus is upon the glory of God. The greatness of God. The power of God.

Only God can declare, “Lazarus come forth,” and have it happen. As the prophet Ezekiel prophesied, only God can say to a valley full of dry bones and declare with power, “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!” This is what we read in,

Ez. 37:5 “Thus says the Lord God to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. 6 I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and

put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.” ’ ” 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8 Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them. 9 Also He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” ’ ” 10 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army. 11 Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ 12 Therefore prophesy and say to them, “Thus says the Lord God: ‘Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. 13 Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. 14 I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it,” says the Lord.’ ”

Giving of life is the essence of the glory of God. So this is the gospel that we proclaim,

Eph. 2:4 “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

God made us alive. That’s the work of God in the power of the gospel. And Jesus says to us, “Do you believe this?”

Do YOU believe this? That is my penetrating question today as well. And that question is of the utmost importance because,

B. Resurrection from the dead is the essence of saving faith.

And such faith is the goal and purpose for all that Jesus is doing here.

v.41-44

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead so that the people who were with him would see that demonstration of the power of God, and would believe. Such belief is the very essence of our faith.

John 20:30 “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

Do you believe this? Each and every one of you, do you believe this?

This is the gospel, and this must be your faith,

Rom. 10:9 “...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Sometimes we make the gospel too complicated. Sometimes we make it too confusing. Here is the simple reality. You must confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord! It must be your confession, your words. And you must believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. If you do, then you will be saved.

Your sins will be forgiven, and the curse of death will be removed.
You will never die!

And you who believe all of that, this is your hope. This is your encouragement. This is the answer to that crisis of faith.

v.25 “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

That’s my job, to proclaim that gospel to you, so that you might always live with this hope in the power of God.

1 Cor.15:55 “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”