

## **I am the Resurrection**

**John 11:17 – 27**

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

March 13, 2016

### **A nihilist's death**

<sup>21</sup> “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

We continue our series exploring the “I Am” statements of Jesus. Jesus said: “I am the bread of life;” “I am the Light of the World;” “I am the Door;” and “I am the good shepherd.” Today we hear Jesus say, ““I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

At the grave of her brother Lazarus, Jesus says to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” Lazarus was one of Jesus’ closest friends. He was a beloved brother to Martha and Mary. Lazarus had been ill for some time. The family knew of Jesus’ power and authority. They hoped. They prayed that Jesus would arrive at Lazarus’s bedside before it was too late. Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Jesus comforts her. “Your brother will rise again.” The doorway of death is not the final word. Hope remains. There is life after death.

That said, I am going to begin this sermon touching on a difficult, delicate, painful subject: suicide. Suicide has touched us here at Fairview in the past. There are brothers and sisters with us at Fairview who know deeply the pain that comes when a loved one takes his or her own life. We

carry the questions. “Why?” “What if?” “Why did he not talk to me first?” Life is complex. I do not believe that there is a single explanation as to why a person chooses to take his or her own life. Sometimes people feel hopeless – they do not see a path out of the life that lies before them. Some are clinically depressed. Others face a chemical imbalance in the brain – illness or trauma sends them spiritually, emotionally, to a dark place. There is no explanation for suicide, but there are many reasons, many factors, that may lead someone to choose that pathway.

But there is one factor that plays a role in some suicides, that I want to address as we begin this morning. What I refer to is philosophic suicide, the philosophy of nihilism. Nihilism is the belief that there is no meaning to life, that there is nothing on the other side of death, and that therefore there is really nothing on this side of life, either. It is the philosophy of the French novelist Albert Camus who declared that in the end, suicide is the *only* philosophical question. The nihilist declares that life has no meaning, so why live? It was nihilism that led the novelist Ernest Hemingway to take his own life. You may recall that in 2005 the celebrated ‘gonzo’ journalist Hunter Thompson killed himself. Most suicides happen alone. Not Thompson. Standing in the kitchen of his home, he put a bullet in his brain while his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and six-year-old grandson were in the next room. He too was a nihilist, exulting in his suicide

Nihilism is the viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded, and that existence is senseless and useless. It denies objective truth, moral truth. There is no God. There is no meaning to be found in the universe. Since there is no meaning to be found ‘out there’ in the universe, the nihilist philosophy exalts the concept of human choice.

What makes a man a man is the ability and freedom to make choices, to assert oneself before the world. Anything that limits, constricts or constrains this absolute freedom to choose is bad. Whatever facilitates and encourages individual autonomy and self-assertion is good.

There is, however, a problem with the nihilist view of things. The Christian philosopher, Francis Schaeffer, used to speak about how we must live within the world as God has created it. The non-believing person may adopt any philosophy or worldview that they wish, but nonetheless they must live in the world as it is, as God made it. Modern nihilists exalt, glorify and idolize the idea of human freedom and choice. Yet they live in a world in which they have no control, no choice, in regards to the most important and enduring facets of their life. A person is born into this world and has no say in choosing his or her parents, siblings, nationality, I.Q., temperament, ethnicity, gender, class, birth order, appearance, hair color, etc. Most of the things most important to us we have little or no say in. Those who exalt human choice find that they live in a world in which most of the decisive things in life have already been decided for them. This gives people enamored in celebrating human choice a sense of dread and resentment towards the world. Shaking their fist at the universe, they determine that the only meaningful choice available to them is the choice as to when and under what circumstances they will die. Realizing that death is the only thing they can have control over, they determine to embrace it on their terms, according to their timing. Ernest Hemingway becomes the patron saint of nothingness as he reaches out to lay hold of that favorite hunting rifle. His last act is an act of rage and defiance against a meaningless world, a declaration of the nothingness of life. For Hemingway, Thompson, and other philosophical nihilists, suicide is a final shake of the fist

before the face of God.

In contrast, the story of the raising of Lazarus provides for us an insight into the nature, meaning and purpose of death in the human community. Death is a reality of living. How should we then face the reality of death? Nihilism is a modern philosophy. It is the modern rage against life itself. Historically, the human community has approached the reality of death in a healthier manner. This can be seen in our passage in the burial customs we see being followed as Jesus approaches the town of Bethany.

The story of the death of Lazarus raises the question: what happens when you die?

### **What happens when you die?**

In every culture, there are traditions, rules and expectations to be followed when someone dies. Death is a disruption of life as it has been. The customs we follow help us to work through our grief and sense of loss and our discovery of a world that has changed.

### **Burial Customs**

In Jewish culture, both in the ancient world and in orthodox Jewish homes today, a death in the family turns the family home into a house of mourning. For seven days, the people of the house will be in mourning. The Jews of the ancient world (and today) bury quickly; within a day or so. In the ancient world, the body would be prepared with spices, wrapped in linen, laid in a walk in tomb with carved niches where the body would be laid. A large round stone, carved like a wheel, would roll in a carved track in front of the tomb to seal it. Weeping and wailing would be loud and

expressive. It would dishonor the dead to weep quietly and fail to make much noise. Friends and other family members would gather at the house of mourning for prayers and a meal over the course of the seven days, making special effort to be present on the day of the burial itself and on the seventh day, when the days of mourning would officially end.

## **Burial Logic**

There is a reason why we do the things we do. The rituals and customs associated with death are intended to provide concrete blessing for the living. In seminary, pastors are taught that the purpose of a funeral is for the living, not the dead. A funeral is to comfort the living, those who remain. Typically, funeral customs accomplish this end by encouraging three different, though complimentary, attitudes. The first is to remember the past.

## **Remember the past**

Funerals are a time to remember. People tell the stories of the one deceased. They remember fondly the quirks and the habits, the things that endear. This is one purpose behind the funeral luncheon after the memorial service: to share stories about the person who had died. [Let me offer a 'shout out' at this point to Diane Drumeler and the funeral luncheon ladies for their skill in facilitating Fairview's funeral luncheons.] The stories told at funerals can surprise. Even in death, we learn new details about the life of the one we loved. In the marvelous movie, *Big Fish*, it is at his father's funeral that the son learns the substantial truthfulness behind all of his father's outrageous stories of his life. Funerals are a time to gather and remember and tell the stories of the past. It is one of God's mercies to have remembrances in our sorrow.

Next, seek hope for the future.

### **Seek Hope for the Future**

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”  
<sup>24</sup> Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Secondly, burial customs should be a time to seek and receive hope for the future through our faith in Jesus Christ. It is never too late to learn new things. At my friend Dave Monie’s memorial service this past December, I noted that when the presiding pastor opened the floor for testimonies, he emphasized that the testimonies were to be focused upon Dave’s faith and walk with Christ. We tell stories at the luncheon. We look to Christ during the memorial service. A few weeks ago Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia died. His memorial service was presided over by his son, Paul Scalia. Listen to how the memorial service began:

We are gathered here because of one man. A man known personally to many of us, known only by reputation to even more; a man loved by many, scorned by others; a man known for great controversy, and for great compassion. That man, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth.

It is He Whom we proclaim: Jesus Christ, Son of the Father, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, buried, risen, seated at the right hand of the Father. It is because of Him, because of *His* life, death and resurrection that we do not mourn as those who have no hope, but in confidence we commend Antonin Scalia to the mercy of God.

Though it is a bit of a mouthful, the official name of the funeral service in the Presbyterian Church is “A service of witness to the Resurrection.” Yes, the family and friends gather to mourn a loss, but also to hear again the scriptural

texts that give us an assurance of resurrection. In such a service, God's people gather to mourn and to confess their faith in Jesus Christ; that through him death is not an ending. The family and friends gather in worship to express their hope that one day there will be a re-acquaintance with family and loved ones in God's heavenly mansions.

Emily Dickenson has a poem that captures this hope magnificently.

The bustle in the house,  
The morning after death  
Is the solemnest activity,  
Enacted upon earth  
The sweeping of the heart,  
And putting love away,  
We shall not want to use again  
Until eternity.

If the burial customs of a culture and society are doing their job, they foster and encourage the remembrance of the past, promote hope for the future, and provide comfort in the present.

Thirdly, they encourage us to find comfort in the present.

### **Find Comfort in the Present**

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

I grew up in an age, the 60's and 70's, when many were disdainful of the habits, traditions, and ceremonies of the past. There was a hunger for immediacy and authenticity

and an equally firm belief that formality and tradition undermined both. There was a desire to sweep the slate clean and start over. It was the dawning of the Age of Aquarius in which all things would be made new. Of course, the Age of Aquarius never arrived.

Forgotten at that time was that comfort and familiarity are found in the habits and rituals of life. The world changes when a loved one dies. The things that have always been no longer are. Therefore, in the midst of the great change that accompanies the loss of one who was loved, there is comfort in the predictability of the habits and rituals of death. The rituals remind us that the world moves on. Their gravity reminds of us the gravity of our loss. The habits and formalities are like guide rails showing us where to walk now that our loved one is gone.

### **What happens when you die?**

<sup>17</sup> On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

The habits and rituals of life are what happen in this sphere when someone dies. However, what happens in the next? I do not know about you, but if I had been one of Lazarus' neighbors, the first question I would have asked him is this: 'what was it like?' Where was Lazarus during those four days? This is what we moderns are interested in: "Tell us what it was like." It is significant, I think, that the Bible shows no interest in this question.

Popular Jewish belief was that the soul of the dead person would remain in the area of the tomb for three days, hoping against hope that it might find some way to return to its body, but that on the fourth day the soul would see the physical decay of the remains and then depart, permanently.

It is significant then that Jesus deliberately delays his return to Bethany. We learn from today's passage that Jesus arranged for his return to Bethany to occur on the fourth day after death when, according to popular belief, Lazarus' soul, his spirit, would have permanently departed. Upon Jesus' arrival in Bethany, Lazarus is dead, his body is decaying, and his spirit has departed. All hope is gone.

I think it is noteworthy that the Bible does not answer the question as to Lazarus' experience during this four-day interval. The Bible is interested in Jesus Christ's power, not Lazarus' experience. The ancient Greeks made a big deal regarding the legend of Orpheus' descent and return to the realm of the dead; the authors of the Bible are not in the least bit interested in Lazarus' eyewitness account.

The Bible's key message is that life does not end at death.

### **Life does not end at death**

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

The key thing to note regarding the Biblical witness is its affirmation that life does not end at death. Modern atheistic philosophies emphasize what they see as the utter meaninglessness of life. Death is a final ending. Life is a pinball game: put your quarter in, play for a while, and then it's over. There is no meaning, purpose or justice beyond the grave.

Most religions, including Christianity, disagree. Even religions as vastly different as Christianity and Hinduism manage to agree that life must go on, on the other side of the grave. Life does not end at death.

## **The dual nature of man**

<sup>24</sup> Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

The reason for this is the inherent sense of the dual nature of man. When God creates Adam in Genesis, he forms him from the dust of the ground and then, in a second stage of creation, breathes into him the breath of life. Man is dust and breath, body and soul, a mixture of the low and the high, the common and the divine. We know that body and soul can be separated, but sense that our self, our soul, our person, will live on. The body decays, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, while the soul remains in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Jesus says explicitly that those who believe in him will never die. Yet, of course, people who believe in Jesus Christ die every day. What then did Jesus mean? The answer is found in remembering the dual nature of the human person. For a Christian at death, the body dies, the soul of the believer does not. The soul lives on. Spiritual life is perfected in eternity.

On the other side of death, the nihilist believes in oblivion, nothingness. The Christian believes in the continuity of the life of the soul. On the other side of the doorway of death, someone will be proved wrong. As Christians we confess that the decisive thing required to be ready to meet God on the other side of death is faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the sum total of all that we need.

Our hope of resurrection is based upon our faith in Jesus Christ.

### **The hope of resurrection is based upon faith in Jesus Christ**

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup> “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

Martha had, apparently, sent observers to watch for the coming of Jesus. She receives word of his approach and she goes to meet him. Jesus stops on the edge of town, presumably near the town cemetery where Lazarus would be buried. He does not intend to go into the house of mourning that was Lazarus’ home. He has other business in mind. It is here, on the outskirts of town, near the place of the dead, that Martha finds him. When Martha meets Jesus, she declares her desire, her wish, that things could have been different. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” No one is ever permitted to know what might have been. Nonetheless, Martha’s sentiment is a common one when we face the reality of death. If only we had prayed more, believed more, given more, done more, said more, sacrificed more. Yet the fact remains that pondering what might have been serves only to increase the weight of the burden of what is.

Martha and Jesus then engage in a theological discussion regarding the nature of our hope in the face of the reality of death. One aspect of finding comfort when we face the reality of death is to be reminded of the truths we believe, the hopes we confess. Martha upbraids Jesus for his failure to come in a timely fashion. Jesus reminds her of

the hope of the resurrection: “your brother will rise again.” She acknowledges the truth of Jesus’ words, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day.” I wonder though if Martha spoke those words with an element of bitterness, implying “what good is that to me here and now?” It may be that she undervalues the comforting importance of this future hope. Nonetheless, their discussion regarding faith and belief and resurrection leads Jesus to make an explicit self-declaration. “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Jesus declares that he is what matters; that resurrection and life are tied to him, his person, his work, his ministry, his coming sacrifice.

Jesus’ self-declaration provokes from Martha a declaration of her faith in Jesus Christ. She declares her three-fold faith that Jesus of Nazareth is: 1) the Messiah, 2) God’s son, and 3) God’s promises fulfilled. In saying that she believes Jesus to be the Messiah she is saying that he is the anointed one. The Messiah is the one set apart by God to be the savior of the Jewish people, reestablishing the Jewish throne, fulfilling their messianic hopes and dreams. In saying that she believed Jesus to be God’s son, she is acknowledging an even greater truth. Jesus of Nazareth is not merely a man sent and anointed by God, he is God himself, present in their midst. God himself has entered her world and she has beheld his glory. Thirdly, in confessing that he is God’s promises fulfilled, she believes that Jesus is the solution to the problem of sin in the world. Sin is what led to our expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It drove us from living in God’s presence, before his face. Martha confesses that through Jesus Christ the promises of God will be fulfilled.

**Will you follow Martha’s example?** <sup>27</sup> “Yes, Lord,” she told

him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

Martha meets the Lord Jesus on the outskirts of town and they begin to talk. They speak theology, of belief and faith. Martha hears the Lord’s words, his claim to be the resurrection and the life, and she believes. She places her faith in him. She understands what he says to her and that leads her to speak her own conviction that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who was promised to come into our world to deal with sin and conquer death.

This is Martha’s example to us, to you. Let me ask you, are you willing to consider the claim of Jesus Christ upon your life. Do you hear him say, “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live?” Can you hear him call to you?

I am challenging you to follow Martha’s lead, to walk that same path she walked. Place your faith in Jesus Christ. Confess him as your Lord, your savior, and your God. I end this message saying what Jesus Christ has said and asking you the same question he asked Martha. “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;<sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Do you?

Say 'Amen' Somebody

<sup>17</sup> On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. <sup>18</sup> Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, <sup>19</sup> and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to

comfort them in the loss of their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

<sup>21</sup> “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

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