

## Love So Amazing

### 6 – Life Is A Miracle

*“I AM the resurrection and the life... Jesus wept.” John 11:25,35*

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

Philippians 2:5-11

John 11:1-44, 12:12-13

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Palm – Passion Sunday

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Palm – Passion Sunday – a day of such contrasts, a cheering crowd today praises Jesus as he enters Jerusalem on a donkey as their liberating hero. Only five days later this same crowd will vilify him as an upstart pretender, a blasphemer, a traitor, a betrayer of God and country.

The story is so immense, as Jesus' time arrives, coming down the Via Dolorosa from the Mount of Olives. This is God's appointed time, and God's appointed way. Jesus enters the Holy City, lauded as a victor who comes bringing peace. "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Yet the murmurs arise, the whispers, the secret plots, the back room deals leading to his betrayal, arrest, mock trial and vicious cries from the same crowd, in the streets - "Crucify him! Crucify him!" As he is given over to a heinous ignominious death on a Roman cross.

On Palm – Passion Sunday Jesus comes to fulfill his destiny, the reason for which he came to earth. His death and resurrection are the heart of our faith. The essence of our salvation. Suffering to death, and victorious resurrection, both through love, the two are inescapably linked. Love so Amazing! "What wonderful love is this, oh my soul – that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the heavy cross for my soul!"

Historian Jon Meacham writes,

"For Christians, the central truth of existence – our ultimate concern, in a phrase of Tillich's – is captured in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Without Good Friday, there is no Easter; without Easter, there is no deliverance from evil; without deliverance from evil, there is no victory of light over dark, of love over hate, of life over death."<sup>i</sup>

Today we look at the story through the lens of John's Gospel in his seventh and final miracle sign – the raising of a dead man - Lazarus. Sign not only of renewed life for one man, but of what Jesus has come to do, giving through his death, life for a dying world. Ultimately Lazarus will come out of a tomb only because Jesus will go into a tomb.

Remember the first miracle sign was simply turning water into wine. Now, in this final most dramatic sign, John offers us this foreshadowing of who Jesus is, what Jesus has come to do, and what the Gospel asks of us - to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God," and "that through believing we may have life in his name."<sup>ii</sup>

John's Gospel is all about life, the miracle of life, the struggles we face in life, to overcome death and those deathly forces that would rob us of life in all its abundance. Life is what Jesus comes to bring. Albert Schweitzer wrote in his well-known book The Quest of the Historical Jesus, "Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him and flows through our time also." Remember Jesus said, "I came that you may have life and life in all its abundance."<sup>iii</sup>

This long story of Lazarus comes at the literal midpoint of John's Gospel, chapter 11 of 21. It is the hinge upon which the Gospel turns. The first half of John brought us miracle stories and their interpretations. This second half, which concerns only the final week in Jesus' life, brings us the purpose for which he came and all that he will endure for us and our salvation.

This final miracle sign unfolds deliberately, decisively dramatically. At its heart is the twin fact that Jesus' is both divine, God from heaven, the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, in all God's power and glory and authority, and also Jesus is man, a human being with flesh and blood like all of us, who weeps at human sorrow and loss.

## I

The story opens with Jesus waiting. Informed by messengers from his friends Mary and Martha that their brother Lazarus is deathly ill Jesus waits, two whole days before going to him. Now the common-sense response when we hear such word of a dear friend's grave condition, especially if we think, or others think we can make a difference in going, as Mary and Martha clearly think is the case with Jesus, the common-sense caring response would be to get up and go immediately. Obviously, these sisters have faith in Jesus that things will be different if he arrives in time.

But Jesus will wait two full days before going, to demonstrate that he is moving on God's time and no other. You see - in none of these final events is he pushed ahead of God's time. This final sign is to be more than a simple healing of a sick man.

Instead of going, Jesus mysteriously, philosophically sits back and tells his disciples, "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."<sup>iv</sup> He goes on to speak about walking in the light of day and not stumbling in the darkness of night. When finally, he says, "Let us go to him," their heads are spinning trying to grasp what he has been meaning, Thomas courageously yet ignorantly stumbles out with, "Let us go, that we may die with him." You see – Everything that unfolds this week will be "for God's glory."

## II

Arriving at Bethany, a suburb on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus discovers something he already knows, Lazarus is already dead. He is met by distressed sister Martha. Remember from an earlier story, Martha had been the practical sister preparing the meal in the kitchen indignant that sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching. Martha launches into a lecture, "Lord, if 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."

“Even now”, Martha both rebukes Jesus for his tardiness and yet expresses faith that even now nothing will be impossible with God, who will give Jesus whatever he asks of him. Jesus promises her, “Your brother will rise again.” She takes this in the traditional Jewish understanding of the day that there will be a final resurrection of those who have died on the last day! Much as we might say to comfort a grieving friend “we know he is with the Lord.” But Jesus tells her, “Ego Emi” – Ego Emi – as God said to Moses at the burning bush. “I AM the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Jesus is saying new resurrection life, life as a child of God is not only for a distant after-life but rather is here and now for all who believe in him. Martha declares the central Christian affirmation, “Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

She declares the same personal affirmation Peter uttered at Caesarea, “I believe you are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

The same personal affirmation Paul tells the Romans, “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

She declares the same personal affirmation our young people today, who are making a public proclamation of their faith, will declare when they answer, “Do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?” And then answer in the affirmative “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior.”

Here is the center point of our faith, not a dogma, not a doctrine, not memorizing a verse or studying theology, important as those things are, but an intimate personal trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Let me ask you, do you have that trust today?

### III

From this personal belief in Jesus’ Lordship, his power to save, trust that he is indeed God’s Promised Deliverer, Martha’s confidence that even now it is not too late, Jesus goes on to encounter the other sister Mary, who likewise is disturbed at Jesus’ delay. “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.” Now Jesus’ heart breaks.

Seeing Mary weeping and those with her weeping, Jesus is deeply moved. And “Jesus wept.” The shortest verse in the Bible with the deepest meaning. For Jesus to weep in this Gospel is a bit unexpected. You see, John presents Jesus in a more austere, mysterious way than the other three.

In Luke, for example, Jesus is the great physician, the embracer of the outsider, who tells of a Good Samaritan who alone demonstrates compassion for a wounded man to the shame of religious leaders who pass on the other side.

Or of Mark, seeing where the rich young man turns away unwilling to sell all his wealth and follow him, Jesus yet “looking on him, loved him.” In John, Jesus this Word who was from

the beginning with God, yet now seeing the grieving human sorrow of his friends' weeps, "Jesus wept." His love for them is palpable.

The Word who was with God from the beginning is weeping over the human sorrow of his friends even as he does here and now with us. He feels our loss. He shares our pain. He enters our suffering, He is always alongside with us.

When the people in Ukraine are suffering and dying and being violently tortured, abused, slaughtered and killed by their barbarous invaders, Jesus is there with them. When we face sickness, distress, confusion, he is here with us. In short, in Jesus we see that God cares. God is compassionate. God longs to heal us, to save us.

"Not throned afar, remotely high, Untouched, unmoved by human pains,  
But daily in the midst of life, Our Savior in the Godhead reigns."<sup>v</sup>

#### IV

Which very thing Jesus now demonstrates, the power of suffering love, in dramatic fashion standing before the tomb He commands the tomb to be opened. Mary objects, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." I love the way he King James version puts it bluntly, "He stinketh." Here is the gruesome somber, horrible reality of death. It's earthly finality. It's ugliness. We have cringed seeing it in the pictures of the tragic deaths of innocent children and old people in towns and cities across Ukraine, civilians mowed down on their bicycles, or walking the streets, or in a train station trying to escape the violence. Death!

Yet what this week shows us in all its depths and heights, in Jesus' death, then in Jesus' resurrection, is that death does not have the final word. Jesus commands loudly, "Lazarus, come out!" "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth." He is a dead man walking in his grave clothes, as Jesus commands the friends, as he commands us, the church to do for one another, "Unbind him and let him go."

Here is what Jesus has come to do for us, give us life, full life, free life, life here and now as his own child, and life for all eternity as his own. And then we must unbind one another. Death will not have the final say - Only because Jesus himself will submit to death. He will give himself over to the forces of evil. On the cross he will in his own body absorb all the evil of the whole world. He will really die as a man, and He will as God, by his divine power defeat sin, death and hell itself. All the forces of evil.

That is why it is essential for us in this week to take in the full story, there is no resurrection without crucifixion. No light easy victory this. Evil is too powerful to be defeated by anything other than divine love. Our host pastor in Pakistan told us – the best attended service of the year in his congregation is not Easter, but the Good Friday service. On the cross, Jesus will submit to the worst human depravity and demonic evil can pour upon him. Crowned with thorns, beaten with whips, stripped, mocked, nailed to a beam of wood, abandoned by his followers, even, he feels, abandoned by God himself, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" "Thus, He will fulfil the prophecy of Islam, "All we like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." And "With his stripes we are healed."

This past week I was reviewing a book I have treasured since beginning in ministry. It is a collection of Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermons called Strength To Love. In the forward his widow Coretta Scott King writes,

“If there is one book Martin Luther King Jr. has written that people consistently tell me has changed their lives, it is Strength to Love. I believe it is because this book best explains the central element of Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy of nonviolence: his belief in a divine, loving presence that binds all life.

The struggle to eliminate the world's evils – evils so flagrant and self-evident that they glare at us from every ghetto street and rural hovel – can only occur through a profound internal struggle. By reaching into and beyond ourselves and tapping the transcendent moral ethic of love, we shall overcome these evils. Love, truth, and the courage to do what is right should be our own guideposts on this lifelong journey.”<sup>vi</sup>

So, in this perplexing week of joy and sorrow, triumph and tragedy, may we walk the way of the Palms, with Jesus, yes shout Hosanna, but walk on all the way of the Cross, through which alone love will conquer.

“When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

See from His head, His hands, His feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down;  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.”<sup>vii</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jon Meacham, The Hope of Glory, p.6

<sup>ii</sup> John 20:31

<sup>iii</sup> John 10:10

<sup>iv</sup> John 11:4

<sup>v</sup> The Presbyterian Hymnal, “Christ Is Alive!”, p.108

<sup>vi</sup> Coretta Scott King, in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Strength To Love

<sup>vii</sup> The Presbyterian Hymnal, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, p.100