

“WHY WAIT UNTIL YOU’RE DEAD TO TRULY LIVE?”

By Rev. Victor Kim

John 11:1-45

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Jesus said to Martha, “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?”

I’ve probably quoted this verse in almost every funeral I have ever officiated at. They are words of great comfort and great promise. Jesus died, but because he has been raised from the dead by God the Father, so also those who believe in him will join him in eternal life. ***These are not words that are only meant for funerals, but they compose the central hope of every worshipful Christian experience, because while it is true that Jesus said, that those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, it is also true that in the same passage Jesus said, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.***

Maybe it is because Christianity is a faith borne out of a time of intense suffering for its initial followers or perhaps it is because the person in whom Christians place our faith, Jesus of Nazareth, didn’t reign as an earthly king, but suffered and was crucified and was buried, there has long been a sense that our hope as Christians lies in the eternal life to come with God, and not so much in this present life. Martha’s statement, in response to Jesus’ claim that her brother will rise again, that she knows Lazarus will rise again in the resurrection on the last day, only serves to reiterate that point.

Christians have often made a false dichotomy between this earthly existence and the eternal life to come. Clearly, when Jesus says that everyone who lives and believes in me will never die, he intends to communicate a truth that we can know eternal life right here, right now.

Our text today from John's gospel account is usually called the raising of Lazarus. ***But the focus of the text is not Lazarus, but Jesus.*** It's really Jesus' death and resurrection that are being foreshadowed in this story. Jesus makes that clear when in response to the sisters' plea to come to Bethany because their brother is sick, he answers that this will not lead to death, but rather that it is for God's glory, so that the Son of Man may be glorified through it. The raising of Lazarus is symbolic of the raising of Jesus, when the Son of Man will leave the tomb empty and the stone rolled away. ***The promise of Jesus is the promise that the tomb cannot contain him, that death cannot contain him, that our sins cannot contain him.***

So, if in Jesus the ultimate threat is defused, if in Christ death has been defeated, what then holds us back from living, truly living, in the here and now?

Resurrection talk isn't only for when we're dead; it's actually more useful to us while we're still alive!

Honestly, there's nothing much we can do about what our lives will look like in the life after this one, and in all likelihood our imaginations are probably too timid to truly understand what that life might be, but there is much we can do about what our lives can look like right here, right now.

I mean, why wait until you're dead to truly live?

Long before we have to face our physical deaths, there are many things we face which can kill our spirit, which can kill our joy, which can kill our hope. Long before they put us in our caskets and hopefully say some nice things about us, we can find ourselves holed up in tombs with heavy stones covering the way in and our way out. Because this story of Lazarus isn't just a resurrection story limited to a certain time and certain place, because this story is really about Jesus and how he will overcome death, ***because it's about Jesus offering us the resurrection and the life, to those who are living, so that we will never die, we've got to find a way to speak about resurrection while we're still very much alive.***

I don't think that we have to look too hard before we can come up with examples of where we need resurrection in our lives today. There are parts of our lives, for some of us larger than others, that we have basically given up on, resigned to being hopeless. We've given up on those parts for dead. And in many cases we have lost our hope ***because we don't think that things can change.***

But resurrection is all about change.

It's about newness, new life, new possibilities, new hope. How many addicts, whatever the addiction may be, how many have convinced themselves that they can never overcome their addictions? How many have basically given up on that part of their lives, given up on ever regaining control over their temptations and their responses? And yet don't we know of people, living, breathing, walking people, some within our very midst, who, placing their trust and their hope in God, have actually achieved new life in breaking their addictions? It's a profound feeling of newness and liberation to go from believing that you can't possibly live the rest of your entire life giving up what you think you can't live without, to one

day waking up and knowing that not only are you doing it, but that what seemed to be impossible only a short time ago, is very much your new reality. ***Jesus can turn around a life. Jesus can change what you crave. Why wait until you're dead to truly live?***

We get so caught up in our way of thinking, in our habits, in our patterns and routines that **we become immune to the possibility of change**, or so we would have ourselves believe. We come to church and whenever there's something new introduced, we feel our backs getting up. It's not that we're actually against the change, or that we think that it's bad, in fact many of us know that we need to change in many ways, it's just that we have convinced ourselves that **we** are not able to change, things may change around us, but **we** can't embrace it, or **we** won't embrace it. At best we will put up with it because we know it might be good for the church, **but we know that it's too late for us**, and so we'll just wait and bide our time until the good Lord calls us home.

With the ban on gatherings, most churches have now gone to streaming their worship services online. For many of us, this has been a new experience, something that we have not done before and as with any new experience there come growing pains. There's a video on the Christianity Today website that shows some Facebook live bloopers from churches new to this technology. One particular clip shows an Orthodox priest, fully dressed in his vestments, and as he comes closer to the camera, the Facebook filter which had been left on the settings in his camera superimposes two huge cartoon googly-eyes on his face. Imagine an ornately dressed Orthodox priest with two large cartoon googly-eyes!

I have no idea why or how, but its hysterical, says the priest, and I'm not even mad, it's fantastic, so, so funny!

Another clip shows an Anglican vicar who was preaching from his office in front some candles and as he gets into the text, he suddenly realizes that his sweater has caught fire. **Oh dear, I've just caught fire, he says, in an unpanicked way that only an Anglican vicar would.** Being open to newness can bring unexpected life and even joy in unpredictable situations.

Presbyterians have often struggled with the concept of evangelism. Someone once said that instead of worrying about evangelizing, we should simply live Christian lives that are interesting and exciting enough to attract others to the Gospel. ***But the problem is that most of our lives are too boring to draw others to Christ. Most of us, in terms of our faith lives, aren't all that dynamic, there's not a lot that's remarkable about the way our lives present what it means to follow Jesus. If we would draw others to Christ, we need to first wake up to a new life in Christ ourselves.***

Wake up, come out of the tomb, rise up from the dead.

Why wait until you're dead to truly live?

I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this, Jesus asks. Do we believe this?

If we do, then we know that our lives are secure in Christ's hands, both the life to come and the life we live right here, right now. **So then why wait until you're dead to truly live?** Jesus can liberate our lives in the here and now.

In a magazine that details stories of recovery, one person writes, “A while back I was going through some tough and tumultuous times. My father had just died; I was homeless by choice (to get out of a very unhealthy environment where my roommates were drinking and doing drugs continuously) and battling heavy addictions to alcohol and drugs. I don’t know where I’d be now if the people working in the street ministry hadn’t been there for me. Since I have left, I have managed an apartment building and got through an IT course in college with honours. I managed to get four computer industry recognized certifications as well. It was very difficult finding work at first, but through perseverance and sending out about 1000 resumes I landed my first job in computers. Since then I’ve worked for one other IT company and four and a half months ago landed a job with a leading company in Information Technology. I have had many trials and tribulations in the past few years but the support I received gave me strength and faith to go on and things are going quite well in my life now. It is always a struggle but things have really turned around for me and I want to send you my thanks and gratitude.”

It’s a story of resurrection, of someone finding true life in the midst of a living death.

What about us? Our stories don’t have to be so dramatic, but they can be resurrection stories nonetheless. Each of us knows where we have given up, where we are certain that no change is possible. **Maybe it’s a relationship we’ve given up on, or a goal in life that seems always out of reach, maybe it’s the hole in our hearts and in our lives that the loss of a loved one has left and we’ve never managed to heal from. Maybe it’s a hurt, abuse, something we’re**

ashamed of, that seals up a part of our lives in a tomb behind a stone so that no light ever gets in. But Jesus offers new life, he offers resurrection. I don't know what it is that needs renewal in your life, what relationships need restoration, what dreams need rejuvenation, ***but I do know this, Jesus opens tombs, he rolls the stones away. And he stands at the opening and calls out to us, come out! Come out!***

Will we take that first step towards the light, even if we've found it so very comfortable to resign ourselves to the belief that this part of our lives isn't open to hope? Jesus opens the doors to the dark places where we have buried those parts of our lives which need resurrection, he rolls the stones away from the entrance, but we still need to walk out of the darkness towards the light. ***So, take that first step, make that first call, don't remain in your tomb but wake up to the fact that Jesus changes lives, he changes what we live for.***

One of the results of the COVID-19 pandemic **has been our reacquaintance with the fragility of life.** We're witnesses to how quickly life as we know it can be turned on its head. Things we used to take for granted, people we used to think would always be there, freedoms we never gave a second thought to, all these things and more are so fragile and can be so easily threatened. If there's a silver lining to all this, **it's that some among us are rediscovering what's truly important in life,** that spending time with our loved ones while we can is more meaningful than getting a few more hours in at work. It's realizing that there's a whole lot we can live without, no hockey, no basketball, no baseball, no golf, no bars or clubs, no Starbucks, **but when we're starved of meaningful, intimate human contact we wither and die.** So even in the midst of the pandemic, every

morning we wake up we should be grateful for more life, **that like Lazarus, we have been given the gift of more life. And like Lazarus, we need to be unbound so that we can live, truly live.** Maybe life in the time of coronavirus may lead us to value the preciousness of life, this life, eternal life and we won't wait until we're dead to truly live.

If our Lent theme is the question, "When they see us, do they see Jesus?" isn't the best way to make sure that others see Jesus in us is to live lives so full of life, so full of joy, so full of hope, of courage, **to live as those who know healing in our wounded places and light in our darkest recesses, that those who know us and expect us to be a certain way, will see us and wonder what happened that we would be able to live so differently?** If we've been gifted with this "Lazarus life," with more life, and if we know that when we finally do die that our future is secure in God's love and in the one who is the resurrection and the life, **then why wouldn't we truly live now, live now in ways that make our lives so attractive that others would want to ask us about this Jesus we follow, this Jesus we love, this Jesus they see in us?**

I am the resurrection and the life, says Jesus. Everyone who lives and believe in me will never die. **Why wait until you're dead to truly live?**

Jesus offers resurrection; he offers us eternal life, true life, right here, right now.

Do you believe it?

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim.
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