

## A Preview of Easter

Psalm 130  
John 11:1-45

Crossroads Christian Church  
April 6, 2014 Lent 5 A

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." If I ask you what you associate these words of Jesus with, how many would say with funerals? They are powerful words of hope and comfort. I held on to them tightly at the death of my grandparents, my parents, and Sandy's parents. I have spoken them with trust and confidence as I have conducted funerals and memorial services. They help us realize the truth of and power of Easter, when Jesus would do more than speak the words, he would rise from the dead.

But these are just a few words, though powerful words, in a much larger story, the story we just saw enacted on the screen. Let's reflect on that larger story, one which sets the stage for Christ's own death and resurrection. One preacher that I read online, Dr. Wiley Stephens, summed up the story, and the whole season of Lent, like this. "The road to Easter runs through a cemetery."

The story begins in Bethany, a small city near Jerusalem. There, the sisters Mary and Martha live with their brother Lazarus. Luke tells us one story about Jesus' friendship with Mary and Martha, how they were so different, yet how Jesus loved both of them. Their home, like others scattered around Israel, become homes away from home for Jesus and his disciples. But John's story begins with a crisis. Lazarus is desperately ill, nearing death. Jesus is in the general area, but not nearby. The sisters sent a message—please come, right away. You're our brother's only hope.

Jesus, oddly enough, delays. He's in no hurry. In John's gospel, Jesus is in charge, and does things on his own time, for God's reasons. When he says that Lazarus is asleep, the

disciples take it literally and assume that the fever has broken. But Then Jesus makes it clear. Their friend Lazarus is dead. Yet by waiting, something special would happen, something that would show the glory of God. The disciples know that going to Jerusalem would be dangerous, and might lead to Jesus' own death. And Bethany was right in the neighborhood. Thomas said, "Let's go to Jerusalem and die with him." I doubt that he said it as cheerfully as the actor who played Thomas in the video, yet he was willing to follow Jesus even if it meant the threat of death.

Some of us have had the experience that Mary and Martha did, with someone you love very sick or critically injured, and we've prayed that God would bring healing and help. Sometimes the prayers were answered; other times, like with this family from Bethany, God and Jesus took their own time. Or maybe there have been other dark times—the ending of a career; the failure of a marriage; the loss of our own health, when everything has seemed the darkest. But then we discovered that God's love is still with us; that there is a new beginning. Wiley Stephens, again, put it this way. "But as in so many times in life, what appears to be an ending can in fact be a beginning-- where we only see death, actually we can see the power of life; where we only see failure, God can open a new door; where we feel abandoned, God draws near and we find hope and assurance. What we are celebrating on this road to Easter is, even though we travel through the reality of loss and reversals, defeats and disappointments, there is power in the world that is stronger than death, even our fear of death. The Gospel today deals with who will have the last word."<sup>i</sup>  
(unquote)

Jesus and the disciples arrive when the community is gathered in mourning for the death of Lazarus. Even before he gets to their home, Martha, the get-it-done person, went out to meet Jesus, while the quieter, reflective Mary stayed

at home. Martha scolded Jesus and put her faith in him at the same time. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus loves it when people respond in faith and trust. So he answered, "your brother will rise again." She thought he was talking about a resurrection off in some vague future, so he responded clearly and directly, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

In an answer that's just as important as Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah, she proclaimed her faith that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God.

Martha went back and got her sister, Mary. When she left the house, all the mourners that were there to comfort her followed her, thinking that she was going to the grave site. But instead she went to Jesus first. The scene was filled with emotion.

Even though Jesus knew the outcome, because of his love for his friends, he shared in their grief. When someone says at the death of a loved one, "you shouldn't grieve, they're in a better place," it's good to remember that Jesus knew that grief is the price of love; that tears are a God-given gift of healing.

So Jesus went to the tomb and prayed, then called for people to open the tomb. Of course, we know the reaction. "It's been four days—he'll stink." But they obey, and Jesus calls out, "Lazarus, come out!" And he did. The one who was dead was now alive.

This story is a preview of Easter, obviously, because what happened there in Bethany was so much like what would happen later in Jerusalem. It showed that what would happen to Jesus later would have impact on all of our lives, not just his. As Paul would later say, "Christ has indeed been

raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." The raising of Lazarus was Christ's greatest and final sign before his own resurrection. It would show the glory of God, and the power of Christ to bring new life. It showed that Jesus loved this one family enough to bring about resurrection, a microcosm of God so loving the world that he sent Christ to redeem the world.

It's a preview of Easter in another way. This demonstration of the power of God, according to John's gospel, became the straw that broke the camel's back. It convinced the leaders of the Jewish council that Jesus held a power that they never could. Jesus became a threat to them, and to the status quo. So it was that the high priest Caiaphas, worried that Jesus might lead a rebellion against the Romans, said that "it's better for one man to die for the people than that the whole nation perish." From that point on, Jesus was marked man, and it would only be a matter of time before he could be put out of the way.

But we all know what happened when they tried. Christ arose, and in that we all, like Lazarus, have new life. Amen.

By Michael Dixon

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<sup>i</sup> Wiley Stephens, "The Road to Easter Runs Through a Cemetery," Day1.org