

If You Believe, John 11:1-45

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Introduction

On Ash Wednesday I raised the question as to whether the Season of Lent was all that useful to the faith of the evangelical. When you get right down to it, though, Lent is meant to remind us of the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the crosses that we bear as his disciples. Evangelicals have no objection to the challenge made from the scriptures and from the pulpit that we must re-center our lives on the cross.

But something keeps happening in Lent, as we preach the texts provided by the season. For all we focus on sin, sorrow and suffering, joy keeps busting through. Every time we get pointed to the cross, we get pointed to the promise of the resurrection. Jesus almost never spoke of his death apart from the promise of his resurrection. That is the whole thrust of today's text. If you believe, death is your doorway to glory, for Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life.

Let us pray: Dear God, Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, send your Spirit upon us to revive us in faith and power as our hearts open to your word. Amen.

1. What Thomas Believed: Death Happens

One of the more unfair labels applied by Church tradition to one of its saints, is "Doubting Thomas." He was a disciple just like the rest, and the Gospel of John does a much more thorough job of distributing dialogue to the different disciples than did the other three gospels. So he is called "doubting Thomas" in tradition because he could not believe the testimony that Jesus had risen from the dead, until Jesus himself appeared before him. We get ahead of ourselves a little bit – that is an Easter story after all. But Thomas appears in today's

story as well. When they heard that Lazarus was sick, the disciples did not want to return to Bethany in Judea because that was too close to Jerusalem, and to the very leaders that had been ready to stone Jesus to death. When Jesus let them know Lazarus was dead and insisted on going to Bethany, Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Some scholars conclude that Thomas was a skeptic and a pessimist. This may be partly true, but it seems to me that Thomas has just rallied the followers of Jesus to give their lives on behalf of their movement and the things they believe; that he was motivated by some altruism, and maybe by faith in God's ultimate plan. His faith may very well be the same as Martha's and those of many Jews, who believed that at the end of the Age there would be a resurrection and God would vindicate the righteous. So Thomas may be ready to die with Jesus in the belief that by doing so he would secure his own reward at the end of the age.

I wonder if many believers today, on the other side of the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension into heaven, still hold this belief about the resurrection at the last day. There are ways that I have preached about the Christian hope that might reflect this view, which is, that we should be ready to be martyred on behalf of the righteousness of God, and then we will be raised and rewarded. This sounds almost like the gospel, but it isn't. Not quite. This belief that God will work everything out in the end and reward good, faithful people is shared by just about everyone in the world of whatever religion they follow, and most religions have their own stirring examples of what it means to live selflessly and even die for one's beliefs.

The key to the Lazarus story and to the faith of the New Testament is not that God plans to raise and judge the dead at the end of days, even though that is all true. The key is that Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life, today. The defeat of death happens immediately in the person of Jesus Christ. Our faith is not in the resurrection as an event, our faith is in Jesus Christ,

who is the resurrection and the life, who broke the curse on sin and the power of death by his own death on the cross and his own resurrection from the dead. If we believe, we can encounter God's redemptive power and glory even now. Today.

Thomas rallies the followers like a cheerleader or an army captain, but his faith is not in Jesus Christ as the resurrection and the life, his faith is merely a theological idealism about the abstract righteousness of God and about the resurrection as an event. Idealism is not where we are to put our faith. Our faith rests on Christ alone.

2. What Martha Believed: Death Stinks

I applied Martha's words about the resurrection at the last day to the faith of Thomas, and I know that this can be confusing. I did it because what Martha stated about the end of days was a belief current among many Jews, and the gospels indicate that Jesus called his followers from among those who held that belief. But when we come to what Martha believed, as distinct from Thomas, I look to verse 39. Jesus has commanded that the tomb be opened, and Martha replies, "But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been dead four days." If Thomas was caught up in the heady idealism of dying for a cause, Martha is deeply concerned with the practical realities that death brings. If for Thomas, *death happens so make it count*, for Martha death is a chore for the living. Death stinks all the way around, no matter how one dies.

As a faithful Jew Martha understood the practical concerns of death both in terms of God's Covenant Law and the traditions of the time within Israel. Burial of the dead took place within a day, and mourning took place over the next seven days. When Jesus arrives on the fourth day, the mourning period for Lazarus is about half-over. By the time of his arrival he does not come to cure the sick, but to pay his respects. When Jesus greets Martha and she speaks piously of her faith, she goes so far as to acknowledge her faith that Jesus is the Messiah coming

from God to deliver Israel. The implied subtext, of course, is, “Too bad my brother Lazarus won’t be alive to see it.” Then Jesus greets Mary, and then, in the shortest in the Bible, verse 35, “Jesus wept.” This is the only time we see Jesus joining in on the mourning of the dead.

This is a sign to us that Lazarus is truly all the way dead, for Jesus would not sin by bearing a false testimony with fake grief. Lazarus is so much dead, in fact, that when Jesus orders the tomb to be unsealed, Martha protests. The body will have begun to smell. There were also other Jewish laws and taboos at work, in that the touching of a corpse made a person ceremonially unclean. Jesus answers her objection: “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” And because he was a rabbi, he was obeyed, perhaps by Martha’s friends or perhaps by his own followers who had come with him.

I can imagine Martha holding her breath as the stone is removed, both in fear of the smell and also in anxiety over what was going to happen next. I can imagine that because my life has been filled with level-headed women like Martha, women who have seen death from many angles and know that it stinks all the way around. Death takes the shape of a letter delivered into the hands of a mother by a man whose uniform looks a lot like her son’s. Death comes after decades stretch into a lifetime together in marriage, and the husband stores up one final aggravation, more inconsiderate than all those socks he had left on the floor; he dies before his wife. Most any church you can find is filled with Marthas who can tell you from the bottom of their hearts that death stinks.

3. What Jesus Promised: The Glory of God

Jesus wept. But he also promised that the glory of God would be revealed. Now here is a quiz on the text. To whom did Jesus make this promise regarding glory? Did he make it to Thomas when he said, “Let us also go and die with him. Into the breach!” (trumpet call)

Jesus made the promise to Martha, level-headed and practical, forced to host a funeral she did not want, her hands still fragrant with the spices she had used to embalm her brother. In this promise Jesus agrees that death stinks; in fact he hates death so much it makes him cry too. But where Thomas thinks he is ready to give up his life for an ideal, Jesus has all the practical details under control, the very details that concern and even plague Martha.

In the first of the details, Jesus has not come too late. His timing is perfect, for in this timing he can show the world that what many look forward to at the end of history -- God, whoever THAT is, making everything “right,” whatever THAT means – is accomplished in and through himself. In Jesus Christ we know who and what this all means. He is the resurrection, he is the life, not just at the end of time, but here and now. Jesus prays to the Father, and commands Lazarus to come out. He does, with all the appearance you and I associate with old movies about The Mummy. It is almost a laugh-line in this story, in the midst of all the joy that attends this miracle, that Jesus commands those around him to untie the bandages.

We do not learn from this story that in faith we can go around raising people we love up from their death-beds in the name of Jesus. For it is God who has numbered the hairs on our head and the length of our days. Some do come back, to die again later. The vast majority die in the fullness of our time, and sometimes that looks like a life being cut unbearably, unfairly short.

Rather, what the Thomases among us learn is that we are not to commit ourselves to lives of virtue and idealism anchored in philosophies of right and wrong, though the world might find these things noble. Rather we are to commit ourselves to lives of redemption anchored in the will of God. Just a few days later, when it became clear that the death Jesus would die was going to be a shaming death, Thomas ran away with the rest of the disciples. I think most of them were ready to fight and die; none at that time were ready to surrender meekly, and then be flogged,

spat upon, and nailed to a cross, all the time forgiving the ones doing the crucifying. But when Thomas and the others experienced the risen Lord, then they understood. After that, they met their own shaming deaths boldly, even proudly.

What the Marthas among us learn from the promise of glory is that God will wipe away every tear, and mourning will be no more. Death with all its chores and stench and embalming fluid will be gone forever. The glory of those men and women who serve faithfully in the practical details of life will shine just as brightly as the glory of those men and women who give themselves up as martyrs to a cause.

Conclusion

If you believe you will see the glory of God. Belief is not a matter of virtue and idealism, it is a matter of a personal relationship with the One in whom is life and resurrection. And the glory is shared to everyone who is faithful. If you believe, then yes, death still stinks, but it leads to new life, because that life is Jesus Christ, and his presence is the glory of God. Amen.