

John 11:1-44 I Am the Resurrection and Life

Prayer: Holy Spirit come and illumine our hearts and minds that the words before us would be your words of life. Show us clearly the one who is the Resurrection and the Life. Amen.

The Presbyterian pastor and poet, J. Barrie Shepherd was spending time in Saint Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands one winter. And he writes that “One of the stray dogs that hung around the house we stayed in had caught one of the wild chickens that roosted in the trees. [The dog] toyed with [the chicken] for awhile, munched, chomped and nuzzled at it, then left it lying in the driveway.” He goes on, “I assumed the poor beast had expired, until it began to give out a series of long, low moans, to which its family in the trees responded with all sorts of squawks and shrieks and cackles.” When the bird was finally still, he went over with the gardener to check things out. The rooster lay there on the ground, head in the dust, legs in the air, seemingly quite dead. The gardener bent down to pick it up but “as soon as he touched one claw, the bird was on its feet, in the air, and flying and squawking down the road and up into the nearest tree. [As if] the whole thing had been some kind of game.” Shepherd teases, “Maybe they put this show on for the island tourists!”

We have become so comfortable with the idea of resurrection that it’s hard to imagine a time before Easter. It’s difficult to put ourselves in the shoes of Jesus’ disciples – of Thomas and Martha and Mary and Lazarus. We’re probably inclined to see Jesus walking through this story giving a wink and a nod in our direction (as if to say, “you know what’s coming so don’t you worry about it”), and gloss over the very real suffering and grief that accompanies death. Like resurrection is just some kind of game, a party trick, or a show for the tourists! Resurrection runs the risk of becoming sentimentalized for us – the stuff of wall hangings, or Easter greeting cards that sit neatly on the desk. Resurrection is the stuff of gravestones and eulogies – reserved for the end of life. This passage in John helps us to put some skin and bones on the idea of resurrection again. But we won’t encounter the skin and bones of resurrection life until we come to terms with the real skin and bones of suffering and grief that pervade this story.

The first sign of grief comes from Thomas. Thomas is resigned to the powers of death. Jesus and his disciples heard the news that Jesus’ friend Lazarus was sick. Jesus loved this man and his sisters, Mary and Martha, but he’s not in a hurry to go see them. After a couple of days

Jesus tells his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." "But Rabbi," he said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" Going back to see Lazarus and his sisters would put Jesus in danger, going back with Jesus would put the disciples in danger. But Lazarus has died now, and Jesus tells his disciples that they must go back so Jesus can wake him up from death. The promise of resurrection is sparked at that moment, but it doesn't stop Thomas from muttering under his breath to the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Different interpreters are inclined to hear this statement in different tones. Some read it as a resolute and self-assured statement – like Thomas is puffing up his chest, mustering his courage and resolve like a kind of Braveheart-style rallying speech before going into battle with the forces of death. It's a nice picture, but it doesn't seem to me to really reflect the Thomas that we know in the rest of Scripture. Thomas is the realist in the group, he doesn't sugar coat things and he's not exactly known for his rock-solid faith. He's a bit of a grey cloud. So he's probably not rallying the troops like Braveheart, but more likely sulking away muttering under his breath as the disciples turn from Jesus to go pack up their things. "Lot of good it's gonna do to go see Lazarus, we'll just end up dead like him." Thomas is a picture of the real skin and bones of resignation and a deep desire to avoid the powers of death.

Thomas is all of us who, seeing the signs of death and its power, are resigned to its power and so try to stay very far away in our own safe bubbles. But here I mean more than literal death. I also mean the powers of death, which encompass all the things that steal life like oppression, self-doubt, social isolation, fear, anxiety, and loss. We hear Thomas's muttering on our own lips when we avoid difficult conversations for fear of disrupting the peace. It's the thinking that "Well if I bring up faith or politics or race or sexuality then I just know an argument is going happen." There are a lot of folks in our congregation going through the denomination's recent report on human sexuality – and Thomas thinking would have us say, "Well I guess we can't avoid the issue of sexuality and gender, but it will probably end in fracturing our church." It is a giving up before the fact. We inhabit the skin and bones of resignation and a deep desire to avoid those powers of death like Thomas.

As the story goes on, Jesus and his disciples get to Bethany where they find Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. They are another embodiment of grief.

They put skin and bones on “If only...” thinking. First it comes from Martha. She heard that Jesus was near and so she left the house to go meet Jesus. It’s been four days since Lazarus died, which in the Jewish mind means that he is really truly gone, that after 3 days his soul has gone to Sheol, to the place where the dead go while they wait for the final resurrection. It’s been two days since Jesus and his disciples left to travel to Bethany, and as they approach they must have heard the sound of cries from far off. Jewish folks in ancient times do not mourn with a sniffle and silent tears, they mourn in loud cries and heavy sobs, and they even have professional mourners in the mix to embody the grief of the family.

The first greeting they receive after their long journey is not a welcome and hug, but an accusation of sorts. A kind of, “what took you so long?” Martha approaches Jesus as the wailing of the mourners pours out of the house, and in her own grief says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She expresses faith that Jesus may still be able to do something about it. But her sister, Mary repeats Martha later when she comes out of the house and collapses in front of Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” This is both faith in the real power of Jesus to have made a difference, but it is also an embodiment of “if only” thinking. If only we could go back and do things differently, he might be okay. If only you had hurried up, Jesus. If only you came as soon as we told you he was sick. “If only” is a desire to rewind the clock, and this is a desire born out of deep grief.

Martha and Mary are all of us who, experiencing deep grief and hurt, replay in our minds all the things that would be better if only we could rewind the clock. In 2019 the magazine *The Atlantic* published an article entitled, “On 9/11, Luck Meant Everything”.¹ In it the authors tells about how seemingly trivial decisions on that Tuesday morning spared some people’s lives. Michael was a chef at the restaurant on the top stories of the World Trade Center. Usually, he’s at work by 8:30 in the morning. But that day he stopped to get new eyeglasses at the shopping center under the World Trade Center. He survived the terrorist

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/september-11-blind-luck-decided-who-lived-or-died/597688/>

attacks while 72 of his restaurant co-workers did not. Another man was supposed to be on one of the flights that was hijacked but missed his flight that morning because he twisted his ankle on vacation. The article is filled with story after story of people who narrowly missed becoming part of the 9/11 death toll. And for everyone story told in that article there are dozens of families left wondering why God had not intervened in their loved ones lives that morning in even the tiniest way. If only God had turned one more light red on their way to work. If only God had made them spill their coffee in the car so they had to go home and change. If only, if only. If only God had shown up in even the tiniest way then their loved one would be counted among the so-called lucky.

We feel this way too at times, even if it is to a lesser extent. If only I had not raised a voice, or sent that angry text, or ignored that call, then I might still have the relationship I miss. If only I had gone to the doctor sooner, they might have seen the signs earlier. If only elected officials around the world made different decisions last year at this time, if only people followed the advice of health professionals we might not still be in this situation with COVID. If only, if only. “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.” In their grief, Mary and Martha are the skin and bones on all of our “in only”s.

And finally, Jesus is a picture of the skin and bones of grief when, despite having already made a promise to raise Lazarus from the dead, he is overcome with his own grief. After Mary collapses in front of him and says, “If only you had been here...” she weeps. Jesus is moved in the depths of his heart, for the loss of the sisters, for his own loss of a dearly loved friend. “Where have you laid him?” And taking him to the place where he was buried, Jesus is overcome with his own grief and weeps because the friend who he loved so deeply is dead. The message of this story is not to buck up and not worry. It is not to put on a happy face. Jesus, who knows what is about to happen, still weeps. There is no wink and a nod, there is true, deep grief. Later in the Bible we read the words, “Where o death is your victory, where is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55) Well, here it is. It’s right here, where Jesus weeps. Jesus is the skin and bones on the real suffering and grief that is occasioned by death and all its forces. Jesus embodied the reality that lament and hope are to be held together – both are an act of faith.

Until we see ourselves in these people and their words and actions and hopes and fears, we may not see Jesus in the present tense. He will remain safely in the past where we can get a 2-D picture of him giving a wink and a nod as he sets off the see Lazarus. We will miss the skin and bones that inhabit a world of grief – a world of resignation to the powers of death, a world of “if only”s and wanting to turn back the clock, a world where even God is allowed to weep. Resurrection in the Bible will look more like a party trick or something that will only happen in the future. That was Martha’s problem by the way. Resurrection was only a future hope for her, as it was for all Jews at the time. As long as we miss the skin and bones that inhabit this world of grief we will miss the resurrection life because we will not see our present need for it. But once we come to grips with all our grief and losses, when we hear Thomas and Martha and Mary and even Jesus’ cries in our own mouths, *then* we will see all the more clearly the one who is the Resurrection and the Life.

Jesus tells Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25) In Jesus, God’s promise of resurrection and life is breaking into the present. Jesus takes a future promise and makes it a present reality, he puts skin and bones on it. Jesus is the skin and bones of resurrection and life. Resurrection moves toward the places of death and grief.

Resurrection goes to the place where Lazarus’ body is decomposing, where there is no sign of life, only the stench of death. Resurrection says, “Take away the stone” and “Didn’t I say you would see the glory of God?” Resurrection says, “Lazarus come out!” Come out of the dark and cold place where you have been left to rot. Come out to the sun and the warmth. Come out to life. The resurrection of Lazarus is of course a foreshadowing of what would happen when the Resurrection and the Life was himself placed in a tomb. But the resurrection of Lazarus is also different from Jesus’ own resurrection. It is provisional in a sense, because of course Lazarus would die again. Maybe even quite soon given that what comes after this story is a plot by the religious leaders to cover up what Jesus was doing by making sure that Lazarus stayed dead. The powers of death do not give up so easily. The future promise is breaking into the present so that Thomas, Martha, Mary, Lazarus, and all who saw it would believe that Jesus is

the Resurrection and the Life. So that they would believe Resurrection and Life is not only a future hope, but also a present reality with skin and bones that they could reach out and touch.

For all those who inhabit the skin and bones of grief, the raising of Lazarus is the assurance that in the end death will not have the final word, life will. Resurrection says to Thomas, to all those who are resigned to the powers of death, “even if you die [even if the worst thing that you image might happen happens] you will live.” The Resurrection and the Life is showing Thomas death will not have the final word, life will. Death may be a firm reality, so too oppression, self-doubt, social isolation, fear, anxiety, and loss. But after death is life. This is Christ’s word to us as well in our resignation, in our anxiety. As many of us go through the Human Sexuality Report and fear for what it means for the future of our denomination, our church, even our families Christ’s word to us is that Resurrection and Life are just as sure as death and division – not only for the future, but even now in the present tense.

Resurrection says to Martha and Mary, to those who stay up at night thinking “If only...if only...”, there is no rewinding the clock – there is no going back. There is only the future breaking into the present. The Resurrection and the Life is showing Martha and Mary death will not have the final word, life will. There is no going back to life before death, there is only moving forward into life despite death.

Their brother comes out squinting in the light of daytime, probably wondering what on earth had happened to him. He is still in his graveclothes, maybe the stench had not quite left him yet. He has no words, Lazarus remains silent. John records no story about what it’s like to die and come back to life. Wouldn’t we like to sit and hear Lazarus’s side of the story? I know we would because Christians buy up books of death or near-death experiences like they’re candy. But for John what it’s like to die is so far from the point of this story. He is far more interested in what it’s like to live. In Jesus Christ, Resurrection and Life have skin and bones on. The one who is the Resurrection and Life is at the center of the story, but also the beginning and the end. The one who is the Resurrection and the Life is the hope of ages past, our hope for years to come, but also the one who comes to the places of death in the present tense. So

come out, come out of your resignation to death and all its powers, come out of pining for the past and wishing you'd done things differently,
come out to the light and warmth of day to stand with the God who weeps with us even as this same God turns weeping into cries of joy.

Thanks be to God for giving us his son, the Resurrection and the Life. Amen.

God of new life, of resurrection and hope, thank you for this gift of your word. Help us to believe what we have heard and to answer with Mary, "I believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." And by believing would you show us your glory in putting death to death, in bringing life to the dark and cold places of our lives and our world. And then equip us to unbind all those who have been captive to death and to nurture life so that our lives would testify to the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. Amen.