

I AM: The Resurrection and the Life

John 11:17-27 (NIV)

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

The woman who were the first followers of Christ to come to his tomb on that Sunday morning, what did they expect? From everything we're told, we know that they came expecting the tomb to still sealed and Jesus' body still inside. They expected to be able to pay their respects to their dead teacher and to anoint his body with spices. The woman of that very first Easter morning came expecting to find death.

And why shouldn't they expect to find death? They saw Jesus die, maybe even saw the Roman soldier pierce Jesus' side so that the blood and water came out. They saw Jesus' body placed in the tomb. Those dead bodies stay there. They had seen death before. Death takes away life.

Are you here today because you expect death? I think most of you, if not all of you, are celebrating Easter today not as if you are going to a funeral. You didn't come here to praise a dead man; you came to praise a living man.

We know that death is a part of our world, even a part of our own lives. Yet, most of us don't think about dying too often. Sure, it's a possibility, but it's going to happen to someone else first. My time is not here yet. We kind of think that we are invincible, that we have a pretty good idea of exactly when death will come. We've maybe even been arrogant of deciding whether or not COVID-19 will make us sick, whether or not we will get it, whether or not we will pass it on to someone else.

Virus or no virus, the reality is that no one escapes death. It comes for all of us sooner or later. It's like a horror movie villain stalker. It relentlessly pursues you at a slow and deliberate pace. It's always there, lurking in the shadows, even though you can't see it. None of us can cheat it. None of us can defeat it. It comes for us.

Because of this, we expect death. We even catch ourselves at times saying that death is natural, that it's a part of life. How messed up is that to say that death is actually a part of life? These things are not compatible; they're the antithesis of each other. One cannot exist while the other is true. Death even came for Jesus. He knew that it would. He told his disciples that it would. Isaiah had prophesied it. The Old Testament sacrificial system was built on death with all the blood sacrifices and blood sprinkling. Death was inevitable. We should expect it.

Maybe Mary and Martha expected it when it came to their brother Lazarus. All we know about Lazarus' condition prior to our Bible reading from John chapter 11 is that Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus saying, "Lord, the one you love is sick." (John 11:3b) When Jesus heard this, he told his disciples not to expect the expected. He said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." (John 11:4) Even without hearing this, Martha seemingly thought the same. When Jesus arrived, she said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (verse 21) But death had come for Lazarus.

The outcome was like all the rest, but Martha expressed a faith that defied expectations. She said, "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." (verse 22) Jesus could still do something about death. In fact, Jesus could do whatever he wanted. So, Jesus, what will you do? What should I expect?

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." (verse 23) We probably should have seen that coming. I mean, we do the same thing. When we go to a funeral like Jesus did, we go either to be comforted or to give comfort. You have gone to express solidarity for the person. As a pastor, I have presided over dozens of funerals, made countless hospice visits. Time and time again, I find myself simply telling people what they already know, like what Jesus did for Martha. I tell people that death is not the end, that if their

loved one believed in Jesus, then Jesus is life, life that death cannot overcome. They will live! Jesus is preparing a place for their loved one in heaven. He's going to shepherd you through this valley of the shadow of death and take them to their heavenly home at the time he decides is best. He's going to rescue them from their suffering, from their death. And more than that, you will get to see them again because Jesus is life for you. You know this because they were baptized, they were washed clean, they were saved, and so were you.

And most people say, "I know," like Martha. "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." (verse 24) I counsel and comfort not with new, innovative methods, but with timeless and eternal truths – the very word of God. I do this because we need to hear God's unchangeable Word time and time again. We need to be reminded of things we have learned in the past that remain true today, right now. We need these reminders because in the throes of grief, you can't recall them. You need someone to tell you just how much God loves you and how he powerfully acts for you.

Today, on Easter Sunday, the message is not anything new that you haven't heard on Easter before. We came today because we expected a living God to worship, not a dead one. And so we have come today shouting, "Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!" Jesus's resurrection from the dead is just as true today as it was back on this past Friday, as it was last Easter. The implications of his resurrection are the same for us today as they were then. God has kept his Word. He promised to rise from the dead, and he did it! He is true and trustworthy! And because God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, we know that he accepted Jesus' death as payment for our sins and his life of perfection as substitution for our imperfect lives destined for death. Because God the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, his resurrection is a preview for us that our lives, like Lazarus', will not end in death.

Why? Because Jesus said, "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." (verses 25-26) Jesus uses the phrase "I AM" to invoke the name of the LORD from Exodus chapter 3: God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14) Jesus wants Martha and us to equate the great "I AM" with himself. Jesus is God, God from all eternity, God who always has been and always will be. As such, Jesus is not just the Giver or Creator of life; he is life. If he did not exist, there would be no life at all. This means even more for us here on Easter Sunday. Since Jesus is God, since he is life, then didn't succumb to death. Death did not stalk him and eventually overtake him. This can't happen because he is life itself. No, Jesus walked straight into death. He took it in, but, because he is life, he walked right back out of it. Death could not overcome Jesus because he is God, because he is life.

Because Jesus is God who is life, he is also the resurrection. Yes, he does physically give life back to those who have fallen to death. He proved this several times throughout his ministry and even with himself. Yes, all will be raised at the resurrection of the Last Day, but not all will live. "The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." (verses 25-26) Yes, we expect to die because the wages of sin is death and we are all sinners. But Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He resurrected us, gave us life, first spiritually. We were dead to sin – powerless, unable to do anything ourselves to counteract death, spiritual or physical. But then God made us alive – it is by grace you have been saved. God resurrected us spiritually, made us alive in the waters of baptism. There, we were born again. This was new life – new life washed clean of all sins and instead clothed with Jesus' perfection. God resurrected you when you came to know Jesus who lived perfectly for you in your place and died to remove from you all your sins. You have his life!

The Holy Spirit raised you from spiritual death to spiritual life when he gave you the faith to believe this. This spiritual life goes on even though our bodies die. By God's gift of spiritual resurrection, you and I have a life that lives on forever, that death can never snuff out. Because we have his life and so will never die, he will also raise our bodies on the last day, just like Martha knew, just like we know. Jesus, as God, as life, as the resurrection, wins out over death every time.

"Do you believe this?" (verse 26b) Jesus asked this of Martha after sharing this amazing truth that he is the great "I AM," that he is the LORD who is the resurrection and the life. It was an opportunity for her to express her faith in Jesus, and her answer did not disappoint. "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." (verse 27) Jesus is her life as well as her sister's as well as her brother's. He is the one who has conquered eternal death in hell for us as well as the death of our physical bodies. He is our life because he is God. Death – physical or spiritual – cannot counteract him. We have Jesus, the great I AM who is the resurrection and the life. This we believe, and so we expect life, not death. On this truth that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, we take our stand. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.