

I AM: Building a Christ-Centered Church *Resurrection and the Life*

John 11:17-27

February 11, 2024

When death comes, pretense evaporates. When death comes, vulnerability is unavoidable. When death comes, we speak differently. When death comes, we choose our words carefully. When death comes, the fragility of human life is laid bare. The unspoken questions that weigh on us always take on greater clarity and deeper urgency, when death comes.

I was standing in the hospital room. The family had asked me to come. They left the room, the air still heavy with the doctor's words. Words like *terminal*. Words like *nothing more that we can do. I'll give you some time with your pastor*.

The door closed. The patient reached for my hand. His was shaking. "There are some things I want to say. There are some questions I want to ask. Why? Why this? Why now? What do I say to my family? What comes next?" When death comes, we should choose our words carefully.

In that moment, I thought about the questions that children ask and how uncomfortable they can make us. I thought about our son Ben who had recently asked me, "Who will be our grown-ups when you and Mom die? Will you come back to take care of us?" There are moments when we should choose our words carefully.

This is the final sermon of our series on the "I am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John, but today the words hit different. There is no large crowd of followers. No hungry multitudes. Not even a gaggle of disciples eager to hear what Jesus has to say. No religious authorities wondering what kind of controversy may spark. This morning, we witness a scene set in the shadow of death. The words are

whispered, the grief still raw. The man who has died was a dear friend. So are the women left to mourn. Jesus knew his friend was sick, and yet he delayed his visit by several days. By the time he arrives, death has already spoken its final word over Lazarus. The service is over. Mary, still deep in grief, stays home. Only Martha comes to meet Jesus, and her words are filled with a kind of emotional weight. "Why? Why this? Why now? Where were you? What comes next?"

Jesus responds with the promise of resurrection. "Your brother will rise again."

Martha accepts the truth of these words, but they still feel like a distant reality, like a remote future. "Yes, Jesus, I know. My brother Lazarus will rise again on the last day." Unspoken but barely below the surface is the question we all want answered when death comes. *How do I live **this** day?*

It is *the* question of grieving families, the question we ask when death comes. Our faith in the promise of resurrection may be sturdy, and at the very same time, our grief profound. I've heard it so often. We know that she is free from pain. We know that he is in the presence of God. And yet, we still ache for the absence left in our lives. We ask hard questions that have no earthly answers. *Why this? Why, O Lord, why?*

In these moments, we should choose our words carefully. When death comes, trite clichés and greeting card theology will not stand up. Stubborn directives to *have more faith* or *pray more diligently* will only deepen the pain of loss. Jesus does not offer his friend a systematic theology or a series of statements to memorize. I hear his words in a whisper meant to bring comfort, not in some imagined future but right now.

*Martha, I am the resurrection and the life.
Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
Martha, death does not win. Not anymore.*

It is important to remember what comes next in this encounter. Yes, Jesus restores the life of Lazarus—quite a moment. But first, he goes to Mary. First, he visits Mary, still grieving in her home, and when he sees her weeping, Jesus begins to cry. It would be an error to rush past that moment.

Jesus wept. Yes, it is the answer to a trivia question (shortest verse in the Bible), but far more importantly, it is a testament to the humanity of Jesus. Jesus wept. When Jesus saw Mary crying, Jesus cried.

Listen. Grief and faith are not contradictory. Jesus, the resurrection and the life, wept when he saw Mary grieving. He wept because his friend died. He wept because he was not there to be with him. Jesus wept because death is real. He felt the pain of grief. He felt the absence of Lazarus to the depth of his soul. He cried out.

When Willie Lincoln, the eleven-year-old son of the President, died in the winter of 1862, his father was inconsolable. On at least one occasion, we are told, Abraham Lincoln rode a horse bareback, all by himself, to the tomb where his son was laid to rest. There he took the body of his beloved Willie out of the tomb and held his son for hours on end. Several years ago, captivated by this image of a grieving father, president of a nation in the grip of civil war, holding his son's lifeless body, George Saunders wrote a novel set in that cemetery, Lincoln in the Bardo. In the book, the souls of the departed are the primary characters. They speak to each other. It is a stunningly beautiful novel. In one section, these spirits of the departed remember the grief of their loved ones when they died. Saunders writes,

“What I mean to say is that we had been...*loved*. Not lonely, not lost, not freakish, but wise, each in his or her own way. Our departures had caused pain. Those who had loved us sat upon their beds with

their heads in hand; lowered their faces to tabletops, making animal noises. We had been loved, I say, and remembering us, even many years later, people would smile, briefly gladdened at the memory.”

Friends, grief is proof of love's existence. Sadness at loss is the price we pay for the joy we find in relationship. Jesus wept because Jesus loved. We weep because we love.

The assurance Jesus offers Martha is no substitute for sadness. It is a promise that sits alongside grief. *I am the resurrection and the life.* Not in God's future alone, but right now. In this moment.

I am life.

I am life, in all its beauty and in every bit of its brokenness. I am life, when the sting of grief is still too powerful to name aloud.

I am life, when it feels like you simply cannot take another step forward.

I am life, when the unimaginable comes.

I am life, when what you feared most has happened.

I am life with you.

I am life for you.

I am life surrounding you.

When death comes, when the questions are most urgent and the answers are least clear, we must choose our words carefully. We say what we know. Here's what I know, what I say to grieving families, to my sons, and to myself. Death does not win. Why? Because God permits nothing, not even death, to separate us from the love of God. In the pages of scripture, God's most persistent message to us is this: I am with you. Do not be afraid.

When death comes, we should choose our words carefully. We should speak the truth.

It was a gorgeous fall afternoon when I parked my car in the cemetery. I put on my robe, and I joined a grieving family in a ritual of simple prayers and sturdy words of sacred scripture. I read aloud, “Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” And as I spoke those words that afternoon, committing our

brother to his final resting place, a breeze stirred up. It blew the pages of my notebook and the sleeves of my robe, and I lost my place for a moment. I paused to get to the right page in the book, and as I did, my eyes connected with the eyes of a nine-year-old, holding her mother's hand, feet firmly planted on the soil where her grandfather had just been lowered into the ground, courageously standing next to his grave, her hair blowing in the breeze.

And I cannot explain it; I will not try. But in that moment, the resurrection was real. Not some metaphysical reality, not some abstract truth. In that moment, I knew that death had already had its only moment. I knew that what comes next is life, life abundant, true, and real. I knew it not because I understood it, but because of the catch in my throat and the beating of my heart and the smile we exchanged. I knew that everything we fear will be defeated and that all will be well.

This week, we'll start a journey through the wilderness. In the church, we call that journey Lent. It starts on Wednesday here in this space. We will gather for worship, and we will smear ashes on our foreheads. They are a reminder that we will die. This earthly pilgrimage will come to an end. And when it does, friends and family will lower their faces to tabletops and weep, holding their head in their hands. They will gather to grieve. They will tell stories about us. They will feel the pain of our absence. And right there next to the grief, there will be a promise. It is the promise that waits at the end of the wilderness called Lent. It is the promise of another tomb. Another body. Martha and Mary again grieving the loss of a dear friend.

When death comes. Words carefully chosen. A promise kept.

Death does not win.

I am the resurrection and the life.