

# To Believe In the Resurrection From the Sorrowful Middle

## Scriptures

Ezek 37:1-14

Ps 130

Rom 6:15-23

John 11:1-44

## Opening

If one only marks time according to calendar months, January, February, March and so on, this has been another desperate week. But if one marks time according to Advent, Christmastide, Epiphany, Lent and so on, the light shines in the middle of this darkness. This past Wednesday was March 25th on our national calendar, but it marked another event. We are nine months away from Christmas Day 2020, an event we celebrate every March 25th with the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. Gabriel announces to Mary she will bear the Savior of the world. In a world overshadowed with deep darkness, the Son of God lives inside Mary's body. He's hidden, but he's present. As Fr John Roop said in his Annunciation homily online, the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary *is* the beginning of the Gospel. God is on the scene, making the world new, before we even know it.

This Sunday the light and hope of Christ shines in the darkness, too. We listen to resurrection stories this final Sunday of Lent before Palm Sunday. How we need resurrection

hope in our world. The Church of Jesus Christ shows her wisdom in this: we cannot live without hope. And there is no hope outside of Jesus Christ.

In the season of Lent, we listen to resurrection stories *before* Holy Week. We cannot endure a season of repentance; we cannot endure uncertainty or loss unless we have the hope that comes through Christ alone. The legendary missionary Lesslie Newbigin famously expressed his attitude concerning the future: 'I am neither an optimist, nor a pessimist: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.'

'I am the resurrection and the life,' says the Lord. 'Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.' I cannot imagine living through March 2020 without the power and assurance of those words. I cannot imagine living through Lent without the hope of resurrection. We don't have to, we weren't *meant* to, and the Church has said so: we hear the faint melody of resurrection afar off. A valley lies before us, but we take that indefatigable hope into the valley of the shadow of death.

## Entering the Valley with the Hope of Christ

Last Sunday we found comfort in Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd." We confessed, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." This week we stand in some pretty deep and dark places. With Ezekiel, we stand in a valley of dry bones. With Mary and Martha, we stand outside the tomb of their brother, Lazarus. The longer I live, the more I have need stories of people facing their utter helplessness. America praises and promotes productivity; we laud the ways of efficiency. We are so untrained, so unprepared for moments when we control nothing. Because we pride ourselves in productivity and efficiency, we do our best to run from circumstances that we can't control. But what do you do when God won't let you run anymore? I want to learn to live in hope even when I'm helpless.

Sooner or later, God teaches us how to live in faith and hope when our strength is spent; when our knowledge cannot save us; when we reach the end of ourselves. It's remarkable how many stories in Scripture include figures who are weak, empty, or helpless before God

brings his deliverance. Israel must stand still in front of the Red Sea with Pharaoh's chariots bearing down before the waters split in two. David stands in front of Goliath without Saul's armor. Jonah has to live in the belly of a great fish before he surrenders to God's will. God sets Ezekiel down in the middle of a valley of dry bones and asks him, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And Ezekiel answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Ezekiel's got nothing in himself. Mary and Martha grieve before the tomb of their brother, Lazarus. They cannot roll away the stone, and even if they could, they're only expecting a foul odor inside. These are the places where human strength is nothing, but belief and hope are everything. I'm not talking about some vague hope in the power of the human spirit. That's not biblical hope. Abraham had to hope *against* hope. Hope must be a Person. I'm speaking of hope in the Second Person of the Undivided Trinity who said, "I am the resurrection and the life."

## To Believe in the Resurrection

Yet we place our hope in Jesus Christ even when his ways do not make sense to us. It does not make any sense that Jesus would not race to the side of dying Lazarus. He is so immediate, so prompt in the healing of others in the Gospel. The Lord spoke through Isaiah, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," and that's especially evident when Jesus stays in the same place two days longer *after* hearing Lazarus was dying.

You have heard it said, "God always come through, even though he may wait til the 11th hour." That's not always true. Not in this story. Lazarus dies. Jesus does not intervene before Lazarus dies in the body. And he could have.

Jesus said to his disciples after Lazarus breathed his last: "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, *so that you may believe*. But let us go to him." <sup>1</sup> Death in the body is one loss, but there's an even graver loss than bodily death. And that is unbelief, the death of the soul's faith in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> John 11.14-15

Last week, I said that illness and loss either sharpens our vision about what matters most, or we turn to earthly things which cannot save. We have choices to make when adversity comes. That's why belief is so essential and unbelief is so dangerous.

Unbelief is not only a rejection of God's power; unbelief means I have to believe in someone else. G.K. Chesterton said, "When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing — they believe in anything." I have to trust something, find strength somewhere else. Unbelief means I'm thrown back on myself, living in my own strength and wisdom, or I go searching for false gods that cannot save.

Everything hinges on believing that Jesus truly is Lord, especially when you're weak and empty. That's where faith really takes root.

And that's one reason why Jesus asks Martha a direct question in the middle of her grief. There's always a choice in crisis, in loss, in adversity. Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Now there is much grief that Martha takes in another story, when Jesus visited Martha and Mary. Martha was busy tending to numerous details while Mary chose the one thing needful: worshiping the Lord. But notice Martha's greatness in *this* moment, when she's totally empty, poured out by grief, Martha confesses her faith in Jesus: "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

## Faith in the Suspended Middle

Martha believes Jesus is the Christ *before* the Lord raises her brother Lazarus. She doesn't know how, she doesn't know *when* Lazarus will live again. All she has is the Lord's promise, "Your brother will rise again. I am the resurrection and the life."

If we're honest, we experience this story more from the middle than its glorious conclusion. We live with Martha's faith and hope that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But our faith has not yet become sight. We believe and hope, but many days tears fill our eyes; sorrow floods our hearts. Why do you not always heal bodies in this life? Why do you delay? We do

not need to suppress those questions. Yet we allow those difficult questions clinging to Christ in faith, even if all we have to pray is: “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”

## Jesus, Deeply Moved

There is much that is strange to us about Jesus’ delay with Lazarus, but this I know: Jesus is not cold when he does not intervene according to our schedule. Jesus *loved* Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Anytime Jesus draws near death John writes, “Jesus was deeply and greatly moved.” Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He wept so much that people nearby said, “See how he loved him!” Bystanders made the same connection we would, “This is the same man who healed the blind man. Why didn’t he keep this man from dying?” Mary had said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

These are the questions so many are asking in the coronavirus pandemic. Yet these questions aren’t solely for a pandemic. These questions surface when when you read headlines, but they become personal when you’re standing by the bedside of someone you love.

As a teenager, I prayed beside my grandfather’s hospital bed for *nine months*, asking God to deliver him and the Lord healed him. We had several more good years with him. A year ago this month, I prayed at the bedside of his son, my father, God did not heal his body in this life. “To God alone belong deliverances from death” as the psalmist says. His ways are mysterious. But this I know. God is not cold. He comes near to the bed-sides and the gravesides of all who mourn. His sorrow mingles with our tears.

## Fallen Asleep, Soon to Awaken

His sorrow mingles with our tears, but there is something even greater than his presence in grief. And that is when his hope mingles with our weakness, our emptiness. When our strength is spent, we still live in hope. Why? Because we belong to the Lord. He leads his

disciples in faith and hope when he says “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to waken him.”

“Come on, gentlemen, we’re going to waken our friend who has fallen asleep in his body.” There’s something beautiful and powerful about speaking of bodily death in this way: he’s not dead, he is sleeping. If I could change one way Christians speak about death, it would be this. Let us always say of those who die in the body in the faith of Christ: ‘our sister/ brother has fallen asleep in the Lord.’ Why is that so important? Because it’s a statement of our hope and belief about the bodies of the faithful. A body fallen asleep will rise again.

“I believe in the resurrection of the body,” we profess in the Apostles’ Creed. We’re not ceding death any power because we believe Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life. As Martha says, Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world. He’s on the way. Oh it’s true, we *experience* this story so often from the middle, but we’re *living* in a story where Jesus leads us to the place where the dead will rise at the sound of his voice.

When Jesus said of his friend Lazarus, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him” we ought to hear the Lord saying the same of those we have loved who departed this life in the faith of Christ.

This past week our beloved and faithful brother, Mike Stratton, fell asleep in the Lord Jesus Christ. His body breathed its last, but his body will rise again on the Great Resurrection Day when Jesus gives life to all who confess him as Lord. Soon and very soon Christ Jesus comes to awaken the saints. Yes, their souls dwell in the presence of Christ in paradise right now, but God created souls to live inside glorified bodies forever. Jesus is coming soon. Whoever believes in Jesus, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in him shall never die. Do you believe this? <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John 11.25-26

## Time for the Important Conversations

There's no time like the present to have these very questions with those we love the most. We are living in times when people are thinking about what matters most in this life, perhaps even contemplating life after death. I make no projections about the return of Christ given present events; but present events make it abundantly clear that we cannot delay the ultimate questions of faith in Jesus Christ. There are people in our lives who need to hear the same question Jesus asked Martha, "Do you believe this? Do you believe Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life?"

Our bodies are fragile, but we can have a hope that goads the grave. Though illness, disease, even coronavirus plague my body, I will not fear. What's the worst that can happen to my body when I believe in Jesus Christ? My body falls asleep and will rise again in glory when Jesus returns.

## Lazarus Unbound

"Unbind him, and let him go." That's the declaration Jesus spoke over Lazarus. And that will be the same command he speaks over all the faithful departed who fall asleep in Christ.

That is Jesus' ultimate pronouncement for life and hope. No human being born in the image of God is meant to be wrapped in grave clothes, defeated by death for all eternity. John said Lazarus' face was wrapped in with a cloth. God made faces so they could see his glory, not to be covered in death. Death is the ultimate enemy. But the only way we have victory over Death is through believing that Jesus Christ who is the Resurrection and the Life. Do you believe he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God?

## Death Defying Hope

Oh we may be weak, we may experience this story from the sorrowful middle, but we belong to Christ. Even when our strength is spent, He is our Hope. We cannot defeat death

and all its friends in our own power. But in Christ, we not only live in hope, we live with boldness. Hear these bold words penned by John Donne:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.<sup>3</sup>

And for that reason, my brothers and sisters, we cling to the Resurrection of Christ even before Holy Week begins. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> John Donne, "Death be not proud". The full version of the poem may be accessed via [Poetry Foundation](#)