

SEEING IS BELIEVING - LIFE  
A SERMON BASED ON JOHN 11:17-44  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO  
SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2020  
10:00 a.m.

Lazarus, Martha and Mary,

were brother and sisters.

They were also some of Jesus' closest friends.

They had seen his work first hand.

They had witnessed many of his signs, his miracles.

They had heard his teaching.

They knew that Jesus was a special, special man.

Which is why when Lazarus fell very ill,

the sisters sent for Jesus.

They knew of his ability to perform miracles, to heal the sick.

It was just recently Jesus had performed the unheard of miracle,

of restoring the sight of a man who had been born blind.

So even though Martha and Mary were worried about their brother

who lay ill,

they felt good knowing they had Jesus as their friend.

When they sent for him, Jesus was out of town.

Messengers brought word concerning his good friend Lazarus.

Lazarus was ill, very ill.

Jesus was likely very aware that Lazarus needed him quickly.

that the sisters needed him quickly,

He was likely very aware

that they would be praying for a healing,

praying that Jesus would do for Lazarus

what they had seen him do for so many others.

While you would expect Jesus to go to his friend immediately,

he did just the opposite.

He waited another two days before going to Lazarus.

He stayed put. Did nothing.

He did just the opposite of what you would expect a concerned friend to do.

He stayed away.

Only two days later did he say to the disciples,

let's go back to Judea.

The disciples were worried.

They knew last time they had been in Judea

they had barely escaped being arrested and executed.

Jesus was taking them right back into danger.

They said to him, "Rabbi, a short while the Jews tried to execute you,

and yet you are going back there?"

Jesus told them,

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep.

I am going there to wake him up."

They thought it meant that the worst of the illness was over,

that Lazarus was resting and regaining his strength now.

It seemed a little curious that Jesus would want to wake him.

They hadn't understood him.

Jesus was using a figure of speech.

So he told them plainly,

"Lazarus is dead.

And for your sake I am glad I was not there,  
so that you may believe.

But let us go to him.”

By the time they made it back to Bethany,

Lazarus had been dead four days.

Ancient rabbinic teaching held that one’s soul  
stayed nearby the body for three days.

That Lazarus had been dead four days is significant.

It is our cue that he was absolutely beyond resuscitating.

His soul was long gone.

Large groups of Mary and Martha’s friends and family  
were still at the house, keeping them company in their mourning,  
offering their condolences, keeping the sisters comforted.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming,  
she ran out to meet him. Mary stayed at home.

I find it an interesting picture.

In another Bible story we had learned that

it was Mary who sat at Jesus's feet listening to his teaching,

while Martha did all the work.

It was Mary whom Jesus was looking at when he said

'She has chosen what is better'

But when Jesus was four days late to come and heal Lazarus,

when anger and disappointment in Jesus arose,

it was Martha the hard worker who persisted, pushed through,

and went out to meet him anyway.

The sisters emotions must have been charged,

likely filled with grief at losing their brother,

likely filled with anger and disappointment

that Jesus hadn't come sooner,

likely wondering

what could possibly have been more important to Jesus,

than the life of his friend.

Jesus had healed total strangers.

He had healed the centurion's boy without seeing him.

Yet for Lazarus, whom he loved,

it seemed Jesus had done nothing.

Martha went out to meet him anyway.

When she came to Jesus the words spilled out of Martha's mouth.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

"If you had been here."

They are words most of us have said at some point.

Jesus if you had been here...

the cancer, the accident, the betrayal, the grief...

It is the perfect statement to put to Jesus in a pandemic.

Jesus, if you had been here,

this wouldn't have happened.

We wouldn't be struggling like this.

So where were you?

Where have you been?

What have you been doing?

Where are you now?

Jumbled and mixed in with Martha's words of accusation  
was a piece of remaining faith.

Despite doubts, despite questions, despite all that was going on,

Martha was a woman who without answers, went to Jesus anyway.

Martha was a woman who, despite her doubts and frustrations  
went to Jesus anyway.

She was a person who took that piece of faith  
that was left, and went to Jesus anyway.

She could have stayed home.

She could have given up on him.

She went to Jesus anyway ,

“If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.

But I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha thought Jesus was looking ahead to a time in a heavenly future.

She wasn't thinking about what Jesus would do today.

She was thinking about what Jesus might do one day.

She said to Jesus,

“I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

To which Jesus replied with

what is arguably the most dramatic saying of his ministry.

“I am the resurrection and the life.

The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;

and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”

Then Jesus asked Martha the confrontational question,

“Do you believe this?”

And Martha, a woman who had been easily distracted

by many things in the kitchen,

a woman living in a time when a woman’s testimony didn’t count,

a woman in the kitchen becomes the first person

to make a full confession of faith in the gospel of John.

“Martha, do you believe this?”

Yes.

Yes, she said.

“Yes Lord, I believe you are the Christ, the Messiah,



the Son of God who was to come into the world.”

Martha rushed back to get Mary.

“The teacher is here and asking for you.”

Well, Mary made a bit of a commotion in her hurry to get out of the house and to get to Jesus.

Everyone in the house noticed her hurrying,  
and thinking she was going to the tomb to mourn,  
they, being faithful, caring people, went with her.

When she reached Jesus,

Mary poured out her heart in the same way Martha had done.

Lord, if you had been here,  
if you had been here,  
my brother would not have died.

It is everyone’s statement and accusation to Jesus at some point in this life.

“if you had been here”

Where have you been Jesus?

Mary began to weep,

her friends and family who were with her began to weep.

And Jesus was deeply moved by the pain he saw.

He wept too.

Some in the crowd saw Jesus' tears, his love for Lazarus.

Others wondered where he had been.

If could heal a blind man, why wasn't he here to heal Lazarus?

If you had been here Jesus, we wouldn't be in this place.

In these days we are in you can understand the accusation.

Jesus went to the tomb, a cave with a stone laid across the front.

Take away the stone, he said.

Martha was very upset by this,

the way we would be upset if someone told us to dig up

the grave of a loved one.

"Lord, you can't do that, by this time there will be an odour.

He has been in there four days."

Jesus reminded her of their earlier conversation.

"Did I not tell you that if you believed,

you would see the glory of God?"

They took away the stone.

Jesus prayed for the benefit of the people gathered there.

That they would believe God sent him.

“Father, I thank you that you have heard me.”

Jesus then called out in a loud voice.

“Lazarus come out.”

Still wrapped in his burial clothes,

with cloth around his head, linens around his hands and feet,

Lazarus emerged.

Jesus said,

“Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Take off the grave clothes.

Let him go.

Lazarus was alive and free.

For all the times I’ve read this passage, it still moves me.

I think it is because we get to experience the event,

through Martha’s eyes.

It carries the questions we all ask at one time or another.

Jesus, why weren't you here?

If you had been here.

Jesus, if you could heal that blind person,

why didn't you heal me when I needed you to?

Where were you when my loved one needed protection?

Why didn't you answer me when I called?

If you had been here Jesus, well...

Jesus, can I trust your judgment?

Jesus, can I trust you to do the right thing?

Jesus, will you be there for me? Or will you be four days away?

You say you are the resurrection and the life.

Do I believe this?

We get to experience a revelation about Jesus,

right along with Martha.

As we go through this passage,

it is natural for us to ask the questions Martha asked.

To express the concerns Martha expressed.

To voice our small piece of faith with Martha.

When Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again.

Martha thought he was speaking of the resurrection at the last day.

She thought he was speaking of a future event.

She thought he was speaking of a distant hope.

A future comfort, not a present one.

She expressed her faith,

that I guess it will be one day... maybe one day...

I would venture to say we think of Jesus saying

I am the resurrection and the life

in much the same way Martha did,

as a future, not present, event.

Something that will happen one day.

But likely not today.

We speak of the resurrection and life

as a distant, far off, remote hope.

As a future comfort, but not necessarily a present one.

We, with Martha express our faith as,

one day... one day...

In this, Jesus provided correction.

Martha thought all she had left,  
was the hope of a future resurrection.

Jesus corrected her.

I am the resurrection and the life.

Now.

The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.

Now.

Whoever lives in me, and believes in me will never die.

Jesus corrected her.

The resurrection, and life, is not a future event Martha.

The resurrection is a person, a person in the present.

Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

In one of his letters to the church, John says,

Whoever has the Son has life;

not, 'will one day have life.'

Jesus asks us today, in today's circumstances

and in tomorrow's circumstances

and the circumstances that are awaiting us one year,

five years and ten years from now  
I am the resurrection and the life he says.  
Then he asks, do you believe this?

These are perhaps, in my opinion,  
Jesus' most powerful words.  
I am the resurrection.  
I am life.

If you have me, you live.  
Starting right now. Today.

We spend our days entombed.  
Not being allowed to leave your house certainly brings the point home.

Right now, stuck in our houses,  
some can feel they are metaphorically dying.  
Without sports, without concerts, without the gym, the pubs,  
without work or school  
without all the things around us we think define life and living  
we are a little lost.

We struggle to move,  
circumstances serving as the grave clothes  
restricting our ability to move and breathe.

But Jesus speaks exactly to that situation.

Even in cancer, the accident, the betrayal, the grief...

Even in pandemic,

if you live in me, and believe in me,

You live.

Even in this, you really live.

Do you believe this?

With his own resurrection,

Jesus demonstrated beyond a doubt,

that all the things he had said about himself were true.

He is the bread, the light, the true vine.

He is the way, the truth, the life.

He is the gate, the good shepherd.

He is the resurrection and the life.

He is life, your eternal, victorious life and he is your life today.



The life we seek is found in a person.

Our resurrection is found in a person, Jesus Christ.

If you have the person, if you have Jesus, you have life.

When you have Jesus,

you are not entombed

and there are no grave clothes to restrict you.

When you have Jesus Christ, you have the resurrection and the life.

When you have him, you live and are alive.

Right now and forever.

Death when it comes, and it will,

because the mortality rate for humans is still 100%

Death when it comes,

will merely be a turnstile, not an end.

The resurrection is more than an event.

It is a person.

If you have the person, if you have Jesus,

you have the resurrection and you have life.

Therefore we do not need to be  
panicked into self-preservation,  
but can be freed from our grave clothes  
to live as light and love  
in the midst of anxiety and fear.

Martha said, 'Jesus if you had been here.'

Jesus showed Martha unequivocally.

I am here.

Bringing Lazarus from the tomb,  
bringing hope from hopelessness,  
Jesus showed himself present, revealed himself present.  
And revealed he is life.

He is the life that brings you out from whatever it is  
that has you entombed.

He is the one that tells you to drop the grave clothes,  
and go free.

Jesus Christ is resurrection and he is life.

When you have Jesus,  
you have the resurrection, right now.  
You have new life, right now.

When you have Jesus,  
Even when you are dying, you live.

When you have Jesus,  
Even when you are anxious, you live.

When you have Jesus,  
Even when you are weary, you live.

When you have Jesus,  
Even when you are grieving, you live.

When you have Jesus,  
Even when you think there is no hope,  
there is, and you live.

His response to, 'If you had been here Jesus, is "I am"'

Jesus calls you out of the tomb to live.

You are free

Free to leave fear, anger and pettiness, anxiety  
bitterness, slander, lying, insecurity, inadequacy, false idols,

Free to leave a heart broken, hard and dead  
You are free to leave what entombs you,  
because Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

We will sometimes catch ourselves saying.

Jesus, if only you have been here.

Jesus has said I am the resurrection and the life.

I am here.

Come out of the tomb and live.

Amen.