

April 2, 2017 – 5th Sunday in Lent
John 11:1-45
The Rev. Carenda Baker

One of the most moving moments for me as a priest happens at the opening of the Episcopal funeral liturgy which begins: “I AM RESURRECTION AND I AM LIFE, SAYS THE LORD.” It is always with deep humility, and usually with a huge breath and my heart beating faster than normal that I speak these words. For this is truly an audacious claim to make, especially in the midst of a gathering of mourners who are gazing into the face of death, hearts broken and aching with the loss of their loved one. It’s not my job to determine who has met Jesus and is a follower, and who may know nothing about Jesus or have ever encountered him. But that moment of speaking the gospel truth with those words is precious to me and sacred, because it is an opportunity to give clear witness to the Good News of God’s undefeatable love for us, made real in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

If, in moments of grief and loss, we are able to take in any bit of consolation from these words, it is usually at the mention of resurrection, which we tend to see as happening on some far off day out there in the future, much as Martha, speaking of her brother Lazarus says to Jesus, *“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”* We grab onto that first word “resurrection” and its hope, which is good and grounding. But somehow, that other word “life” goes unnoticed, fades into the background, gets left behind. Is it somehow less important, dispensable even? I don’t think so because it is comfort and assurance of life, on both sides of the grave – full, abundant life that we who stand there in tears, mourning for our loved ones need most at times of grief and loss. Life – it goes on for us and our beloved departed ones – life “changed but not ended”.

So what is it we are claiming if we say, like Martha did, we believe Jesus’ words: ***“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”?***

Resurrection. Resurrection is about God's power over death, now and forever. It is the power of love to transform, to create hope when hope is gone, a way where no path is visible, life where all seems lost, lifeless, dead. We will enter into the passion story next Sunday and hear once again how Jesus faced into the treachery, pain, and separation caused by human sin and death. How Jesus walked through the valley of the shadow of death, endured the desolation like that valley of dry bones in Ezekiel, and finally descended to the dead. All this so that we can live and die knowing that nothing will ever again be able to separate us from God and God's love. NOTHING. EVER.

And what about Jesus' words, "***I am the life***"? What does it mean to say yes, I believe that Jesus is the life?

1. The first thing it means is that Jesus knows about human life from firsthand experience. Jesus has walked in our shoes. Jesus knows about vulnerability, how much we try to avoid it, how exposed it makes us feel, how deeply we can be hurt when we let ourselves live open-hearted and undefended toward the world. Jesus has lived and experienced the joys and sorrows, the separation and homecoming, the fears and assurances that weave through our days. Jesus knows about the heartbreak and the comforts of life, "the swift and varied changes of the world" as the collect for today puts it. Jesus as life is the Spirit's holy presence in every breath we take, and every move we make. GOD WITH US. GOD IN US. The Giver of all life.
2. The second thing it means to say that Jesus is the life is that Jesus is linked with every single thing on earth and in heaven that makes for wholeness. Light, love, laughter. Faithfulness, forgiveness, and freedom. Judgment, justice, and joy. Healing, health, and hope. Revelry, rest, and relationships. This is not the stuff of sparseness, scarcity, or lackluster living. Jesus as life is about robustness and abundance, courage and compassion, wholeness and healing for the entire world.

3. The third thing “Jesus is the life” means is that when we meet and follow Jesus it will change us. It begins in baptism, when we are forever bound to Jesus and made part of Christ’s eternal living Body, branded “Christian”, if you will, sealed with the sign of the cross on our foreheads, buried in the baptismal waters with him and raised to new life. In baptism Jesus’ work becomes our life’s work, bringing God’s goodness and light to the world, even when the world insists on dismissing and actively resisting God’s love.

The gospel nugget that most captured my attention in John’s story of the raising of Lazarus is Jesus’ final words to the dazed onlookers, the witnesses who see Lazarus walk out of the darkness and stench of the tomb into the fresh air and bright light of day after Jesus commands him to come out.

“Unbind him, and let him go.” Bracing words, delivered with authority. The community does not get to be mere bystanders. They do not get to just stand around and say, “Hallelujah! Jesus has done it again, what a miracle!” No. Jesus calls *them* to actively help with this resurrection work. The community of seers and believers must now help Lazarus get free of those confining grave clothes, help him to claim new life for himself – no longer bound tightly, no longer restricted, but set free to walk away and leave behind the old Lazarus who had been wrapped in the stuff wreaking of death which he has no use for now.

Our Lenten walk with Jesus promises to get steeper, tougher, and more sobering in the coming days. As we continue that faithful walk, now is a good time for us to examine our lives and see what there might be that has *us* bound. Bound to thoughts, behaviors, and attitudes that are not life-giving – things like fear, inflated ego and pride, bitterness, false guilt, shame. Places where we are still tangled in the grave clothes of sin and brokenness. At baptism we do begin to live a new reality in Jesus, but there are still things from which we need to be set free. Things we need others to help us stay disentangled from as disciples of Jesus.

And friends, we are called to do this for each other, to help unbind each other, and by doing so, stir and spread the ripples of goodness and hope, sending love and life out into the world in Jesus' name.

For this Trinity Church, individually and corporately, Jesus' words are meant to guide us – to guide who we are and all that we do. “Unbind him, and let him go. Unbind her and let her go.” Those are words of action that we are meant to take into our hearts anew each day. Unbind somebody. Where you find someone in bondage – friend, spouse, child, neighbor, stranger. Where you find someone struggling to live free, reach out to help unbind them and let them go. Don't stand by and watch them all tangled up in the old affairs, the soiled wrappings of the past, the tattered shreds of the grave clothes of dis-ease, division, desolation, and death. Help unbind them, and let them walk free.

Thanks be to God that at this holy table, we will be revived, sustained, and sent forth to do Jesus' holy work of calling forth life. Jesus is always calling us toward renewed life in him. Life that is richest when generously given away. Because when it comes to love and life, when we give it away, we always end up having more. Such is the mystery of God's grace. Amen.