

“Right Here, Right Now”

“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.”

The social isolation and distancing that we are experiencing during this COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the fact that human beings are by nature social creatures. While under normal circumstances we spend some portion of our days alone, we are inclined to gather together on both regular and special occasions. Meeting a friend for coffee used to be a simple choice that is now forbidden; having friends over for dinner is not a possibility; celebrating a birthday or anniversary with a party is an event that needs to be cancelled or postponed for the sake of the health of our families and community. We are seeking to stay connected via phone calls, text messaging, Skype and Facetime; we gather on our balconies to greet and serenade our neighbors from a distance; some are even organizing “birthday parades” to drive by the home of someone celebrating their birthday during this pandemic. We will never take for granted the importance of social gatherings and our craving for “*a little of that human touch*.” (Bruce Springsteen)

One of the most important social gatherings that are currently off-limits are funeral services and visitations, times when we gather to support one another as we mourn the loss of a loved one. It has been heartbreaking to read the obituaries in the *Stratford Beacon Herald* where funeral services need to be put on hold until the COVID-19 crisis has passed. At a time when mourners need the physical embrace of family, friends, and neighbors to offer them strength and support in the hour of their grief, we are prevented from gathering lest we spread this insidious virus that has invaded our communities. When my parents died, the greatest source of comfort and strength I received was from the many people who came to the visitations and the funeral services to surround me with their physical, emotional, and spiritual support. I frankly don’t remember much of what was said in the funeral services (including my own sermon that I preached at my Father’s funeral in November 1999), but I remember the faces of the people who gathered around me and walked with me through the “valley of the shadow of death.” Another mourner wrote of the importance of gatherings at the time of death when she recounted the experience of those who supported her when her son passed away:

- “Visitation. Funeral service. Graveside committal. Lunch at the church. These rituals are necessary. The community gathers to acknowledge that one has died, never to be among us again, and to tell the mourners, I know this has happened to you and I’m here for you in this time of crisis. I’m here to mourn with you and to hear the gospel, God’s good news; to stand beside you with hope and promise, walking with you as you reenter your world of reality.” – Corinne Chilstrom, *Andrew, You Died Too Soon*.

As we gather in churches, funeral homes, and the homes of mourners to offer our comfort and support, in the Jewish faith mourners gather to sit *shiva*, a seven-day period of mourning in which friends and family gather in the home of the deceased to offer their condolences and support. This is the context of our Gospel lesson from the Gospel of John, in which Mary and Martha are joined by their community in Bethany as they mourn the death of their brother Lazarus: “... *many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother*.” (11:19). Mary, Martha and Lazarus were among Jesus’ closest friends, and he was a frequent guest in their home whenever he was in Bethany, which was located “*some two miles away*” from Jerusalem. One of those visits to Mary and Martha is recounted in Luke’s Gospel, where

the distinctions between the sisters is highlighted in Jesus' teaching to Martha that *"you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."* (Luke 10:41-42). In the Fourth Gospel, Mary is identified as *"the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair"* (11:2). We are then informed that her brother Lazarus was ill; the Evangelist does not give details as to the illness with which he is afflicted, but it is serious enough that the sisters send word to Jesus that *"Lord, he whom you love is ill"* (11:3), clearly expecting Jesus to drop everything and hurry at once to his bedside. But surprisingly, Jesus remained where he was for two days, saying that *"this illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* (11:4). He continues to stay away from Bethany, and then surprisingly tells his disciples that *"Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."* (11:14). When he finally travels to Bethany, Jesus was informed that Lazarus *"had already been in the tomb for four days"* (11:17), which underscored the finality of his death. According to popular Jewish belief at the time, the soul hovered over the body in the grave for three days, hoping to reenter the body. But after three days, when the soul *"sees that the color of its face has changed,"* the soul leaves the body.

When word arrives in the home of Mary and Martha that Jesus has finally arrived to sit *shiva* with them, Martha goes out to meet him while Mary stays at home with her fellow mourners. We cannot hear the tone of her voice in the words that John records, but we can imagine that they were tinged with sadness and anger and she says to Jesus *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* (11:21). Why didn't you come immediately? Why did you purposely delay your journey, especially when we sent word to you about Lazarus' illness? Why didn't you come and do something – anything – at our hour of greatest need? Where were you, Jesus?

Yet even in the midst of her anger and disappointment, Martha expresses her confidence that *"even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him"* (11:22), a statement of faith that God has given all things into Jesus' hands (*"The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands."* – 3:35). Jesus responds to Martha by announcing that *"your brother will rise again."* (11:23). The belief in the general resurrection of the dead can be traced back to Daniel 12:2 (*"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."*). Martha's response is somewhat ambiguous; she affirms her belief in one of the tenets of the Jewish faith, but appears to misunderstand Jesus' words as merely one of the customary sayings of general comfort that Jews uttered at the time of death (similar to saying that the one who has died is *"in a better place"*). She joins Jesus in professing the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, which was widely accepted by common people in Jesus' time; but she fails to understand that Jesus is referring to something radically different from the common expectations of her fellow mourners. This becomes the occasion for one of Jesus' most important teachings in the Fourth Gospel, where he identifies himself as the one who comes to fulfill God's Will and bring a new message of light and life to God's people:

- "Jesus said to her, '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. Do you believe this?'" – 11:25-26.

The *"I am"* (*ego eimi*) statements are a unique feature of John's Gospel as Jesus identifies himself as the fulfillment of the expectations of God's people using a variety of images:

- "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." – 6:35.

- “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” – 8:12.
- “I am the good shepherd.” – 10:11.
- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” – 14:6.
- “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.” – 15:1.

The promise of resurrection and life is not lodged in some distant event but is already available in the person of Jesus. *“By announcing that he is both the resurrection and the life, Jesus affirms his sovereignty over the present and the future lives of believers.”* (Gail O’Day). This double dimension is brought out by two tightly constructed parallel phrases built around the verbs “believe” (*pisteuo*), “life” (*zao*) and “die” (*apothnesko*). The focus of the second phrase is the effect that believing in Jesus has on a believer’s death (*“everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”*); the focus of the first phrase is the effect that believing in Jesus has on a believer’s life (*“those who believe in me, even though they die, will live”*). For Jesus to be the “resurrection” means that physical death has no power over believers; their future is determined by their faith in Jesus, not by their death:

- “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.” – 6:39-40.

For Jesus to be the “life” means that the believer’s present is also determined by Jesus’ power for life, experienced as his gift of eternal life:

- “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.” – 3:16.
- “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.” – 5:24.
- “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” – 10:28.

Jesus’ statement ends with a question to Martha: *“Do you believe this?”* While she affirms her faith in Jesus as *“the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world”* (11:27), Jesus is invited her to believe that *“her days do not need to be reckoned by the inevitable power of death, but instead by the irrevocable promise of life with God.”* (O’Day).

- “One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ, as Christ says, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live’ ... Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing.” – Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520.

While we are separated and isolated from many important things in these days, we have the assurance that God is present with us and that the Word of God remains a source of life, truth, peace, joy, and power. We may not be able to gather with the ones we love, but we know that God’s presence gives us strength to

meet these days of fear and uncertainty in the comfort of a holy and certain hope. We live in days when the shroud of the COVID-19 virus has descended upon our world, afflicting many physically and others emotionally and spiritually; but we believe that in Christ death is not the final word, for we live in the sure and certain hope of life in Christ that is both *“strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow”* (ELW Hymn 733). Our faith is rooted in a living God who is with us always, the blessed name of Jesus who *“charms our fears and bids our sorrows cease, sings music in the sinner’s ears, brings life and health and peace.”* (ELW Hymn 886).

- “Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yes, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past, but by the reality of Christ’s power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past; that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus.” – Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*.

None of us knows how long this period of social distancing and isolation will continue, and as each day passes, we yearn for the interactions and connections that we once took for granted. As the days, weeks, and perhaps months unfold we may find ourselves struggling with loneliness and despair, especially if we suffer the death of a loved one without the embrace of those who would have gathered to accompany us in the hour of our grief. But no matter how long or how difficult this ordeal will be, we live in the assurance that our faith is rooted in the sure and certain knowledge that Christ is with us always, that in him is both the promise of resurrection on the day of the Lord *and* life that is with us right here, right now, the Word of life that assures us that darkness and despair will not define these days, because even now *“this is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”* (Psalm 118:24).

We do not know how long this pandemic will last; we do not know how long we will be unable to gather together; we do not know how long we will need to be apart, even when we need human touch in times of despair and sorrow. But we do know that God is with us, that the darkness will give way to the light of Christ, and that because Christ is with us always we live in trust and hope – right here, right now – that *“those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”*

Right here, right now, the one who is “the resurrection and the life” is with us!

Amen.