

Resurrection

April 6, 2014

This sermon was preached by Seminarian Jamie Brieske at Trinity Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, WI

Resurrection-What a pleasant surprise that here on this fifth Sunday of Lent- we have a story of resurrection! Two weeks until Easter and we do not have to wait a day longer to see the power of God's resurrection in the life of Lazarus. Resurrection- maybe you have been hearing more of this word lately- or have seen it flash across your TV screen. It happens to be the title of a new show on ABC that the network has been promoting all winter long it seems. Resurrection is a show about dead loved ones from a small town that mysteriously appear years after their death. I've watched a few scenes from the first couple episodes myself only to end up turning the channel. As you can imagine it really pulls on the heartstrings, and as a quite pregnant woman I try to avoid elements of fiction that dissolve me into a hot mess of tears! When my Seminary friends saw the promotions for this show there was a collective round of groans. One friend said, "Resurrection- really?! It is hard enough teaching our people about resurrection without a TV show to compete with." I laughed at this. But haven't we as Christians cornered the market on resurrection?! (Well maybe not...)

In today's story from John's gospel, resurrection looks quite different. It is not a worldwide mysterious phenomenon. It is not a strange undead reality. And neither is it Jesus putting on a grand display of power or magic. Rather it comes out of grief and tears and apparent weakness. Jesus is distressed, weeping and moved in his very bowels at the death of Lazarus and his friends. Jesus is moved to call Lazarus out of the tomb, by human compassion and love.

The beginning of our story sets the stage for the big moment. John, the only gospel writer to include this story, gives the story a lengthy introduction to get our attention. And it is not necessarily in chronological order. For instance we are introduced to Mary as 'the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair.' And yet she hasn't even done this yet, this is chapter 11 and that story comes just after this one in chapter twelve. It seems John's introduction is meant to get our attention and let us know that something big is going to happen. It also serves to foreshadow Jesus' own death and resurrection. In our introduction Jesus looks like the confident leader who has it all under control- the one with a plan. And yet just before he gets to Bethany this depiction starts to unravel.

Martha, the sister of Lazarus, meets Jesus on the road. Always the gracious host and the manager of the household, Martha is taking charge. We know from our introduction and other gospel stories that Martha's family has a special place in Jesus' heart. He loves them. And it seems he has used their house in Bethany as a home for himself and his disciples throughout his ministry. When Martha meets Jesus on the road, she speaks with him honestly, "Lord if you had only been here, my brother would not have died." It is both a lament and a statement of faith. Jesus hints at the possibility of raising Lazarus, and yet Mary misunderstands. She believes in the final resurrection and yet that does not change her grief.

When Mary greets Jesus, she uses the same words. "Lord if you had only been here..." And her lament seems to echo believers throughout time who have wondered about God's presence or

absence during times of death and suffering. She too believes in the final resurrection, but it is the very body and breath and spirit of her brother that she grieves. It is his physical absence that she grieves. And Jesus understands this. He is touched by her sorrow. Jesus is 'greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved' as our story accounts. In compassion and love, he weeps with Mary.

As Jesus grieves with Mary and their friends and family, for the friend he loved, he shares in their grief and suffering. And then out of his weakness and grief, the hope that Mary and Martha had waited for materializes. The impossible happens. Jesus prays and cries in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man comes out.

In our own life of faith, we can take Jesus' response to heart. When we suffer, we know that we serve a God who weeps with us, who sits by us in our difficulties and loves us in our weakness. We also learn that our response to our brothers and sisters in need is *not* to jump to the hope of the final resurrection. Rather we can experience the love and compassion of Jesus in the present. Jesus matters in the now! We can experience resurrection life in our relationship with God today - and we can share that with others. We may not always have the power to change the events of people's lives or the laws of nature, but we do have the power of human compassion and love.

I've experienced this in my own life of faith, and maybe you have too. During my second year of Seminary I lost my nephew Drew to brain cancer. He wasn't even two years old. My family did not receive the miracle that we prayed for. And yet, we experienced the tangible presence of God in our lives during that time of sorrow. We had people who prayed with us through the long dark night. We had healing hands of compassion that held us in our grief. I had friends that wept with me- distressed and moved by compassion and love. And through this I knew that my faith was not only a faith of tomorrow, but a source of hope and strength for this very day.

I see evidence of this resurrection life here at Trinity! Because you have been welcomed by the love and grace of God you have chosen to officially extend that welcome to all- even those who have previously been excluded from the church because of their sexuality. Here God's grace matters today, in the everyday life of this community.

In the story of Lazarus we see how Jesus embodies the love and compassion of God. We see that this new life of resurrection is not meant to be only a spiritual hope for tomorrow, but also a living hope for today. Lazarus' death hints at Jesus' own death on the cross. In the cross, Jesus is not all-powerful, but suffering with humanity on the cross. When Jesus is raised- it is not a world-wide phenomenon and public event. Instead Jesus appears to his friends and his followers. And even in his resurrected body- he is recognized by the wounds of the cross in his hands and his feet. Not in glory but in scars. Jesus' identity is found in being one who suffers with others. And so it is with us, as followers of Jesus. We can be recognized as Christians when we grieve with others- when we care for those in need in our community- when we welcome the outcast- when we bear the marks of the cross. This is living in the resurrection hope of today.