

John 11:17-27
April 10, '11

**THE QUESTIONS OF JESUS
"DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?"**

(Before scripture)

THE LAST TIME I PREACHED ON OUR PASSAGE FOR TODAY WAS A YEAR & A HALF AGO, DURING OUR "UNBINDING THE GOSPEL" SERIES.

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO THAT SERMON, I SAID "*I CONSIDERED JUST READING A PORTION OF IT, BUT I COULDN'T REALLY DECIDE WHICH PORTION TO LEAVE OUT.*"

THIS IS ONE OF THOSE STORIES IN THE BIBLE THAT ALMOST DEFIES OMISSION OF ANY OF IT BECAUSE IT ALL GOES TOGETHER AS ONE COHESIVE UNIT.

IT'S THE FIRST 45 VERSES OF JOHN'S 11TH CHAPTER.

TODAY, I WILL RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO READ IT ALL & FOCUS ON ONE SECTION – ONE LITTLE ASPECT OF THE STORY.

MY FIRST THOUGHT IN JUSTIFYING THIS APPROACH IS THAT YOU ALREADY KNOW THE STORY OF THE RAISING OF LAZARUS.

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT STORY, DON'T THEY – EVEN THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER BEEN TO CHURCH!

THAT'S NOT TRUE, THOUGH, AS I TOLD YOU IN THE CONCLUSION OF THAT SERMON I PREACHED 18 MONTHS AGO.

I WAS ATTENDING A WORSHIP SERVICE WITH A FRIEND WHEN THIS PASSAGE WAS READ & THE FRIEND TURNED TO ME & WITH ASTONISHMENT MINGLED WITH HOPE ASKED, "*DID THAT REALLY HAPPEN!?*"

I WAS AS ASTONISHED AS HE WAS – ASTONISHED & ASHAMED.

I WAS ASTONISHED THAT HE'D NEVER HEARD THE STORY BEFORE & I WAS ASHAMED THAT I HAD NEVER TOLD HIM.

ONE OF MY DEAREST FRIENDS & I'D NEVER TOLD HIM THAT JESUS RAISED LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD.

WELL, FOR THOSE LIKE MY FRIEND WHO HAD NEVER HEARD IT OR FOR THOSE WHO NEED TO BE REMINDED, HERE IT IS.

AND, I MIGHT ADD, IT'S GOOD TO TELL IT ANYWAY.

THE GREAT PREACHER FRED CRADDOCK, IN COMMENTING ON THIS PASSAGE, SAID, "*TWO GROUPS OF PEOPLE ARE MOVED BY A STORY OF LIFE & DEATH: THOSE WHO HAVE NOT HEARD IT & THOSE WHO HAVE.*"

THE STORY BEGINS WITH JESUS IN FULL RETREAT ACROSS THE JORDAN AFTER THE SECOND ATTEMPT TO STONE HIM IN JERUSALEM.

WORD COMES THAT HIS GOOD FRIEND, LAZARUS, HAS DIED.

RATHER THAN JUMPING UP & HEADING STRAIGHT TO BETHANY & THE HOME OF LAZARUS AND HIS TWO SISTERS, JESUS JUST STAYS WHERE HE IS.

NOW THERE COULD HAVE BEEN A VARIETY OF REASONS FOR HIS DELAY IN GOING.

FIRST OF ALL, BETHANY IS JUST 2 MILES FROM JERUSALEM & JESUS HAS JUST ESCAPED BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH.

IF HE GOES BACK, HE WILL NO DOUBT BE A MARKED MAN ONCE AGAIN.

MAYBE THAT'S WHY HE WAITED.

OR MAYBE HE WAITED TO MAKE THE MIRACLE HE WOULD PERFORM BE ALL THAT MUCH MORE ASTOUNDING.

OR MAYBE - AND THIS IS THE REASON THAT IS MOST APPEALING TO ME - MAYBE HE'S TRYING TO TEACH HIS DISCIPLES & TRYING TO TEACH US, THAT GOD'S TIMING ISN'T OUR TIMING – GOD'S WAYS AREN'T OUR WAYS.

SOME THINGS JUST DON'T MAKE SENSE TO US BECAUSE WE ARE CONFINED BY OUR LIMITED HUMAN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT'S BEST.

WELL, JESUS DOES FINALLY GO BACK TO BETHANY BUT NOT WITHOUT SOME SERIOUS DISAGREEMENT ABOUT DOING SO FROM THE DISCIPLES.

THERE ARE A COUPLE OF EPISODES BEFORE HE ARRIVES AT THE TOMB – ONE OF WHICH IS THE PASSAGE WE'LL READ TODAY.

WHEN HE FINALLY GETS TO THE BURIAL PLACE, EVERYONE AROUND IS CRYING & IN DEEP SORROW.

AS JESUS LOOKS AT THE TOMB, HE, TOO, BEGINS TO CRY.

HE THEN INSTRUCTS THOSE NEARBY TO ROLL AWAY THE STONE FROM THE TOMB.

THEY'RE SHOCKED TO HEAR SUCH A RIDICULOUS COMMAND BECAUSE, AS THEY REMIND HIM, LAZARUS HAS ALREADY BEEN DEAD NOW FOR FOUR DAYS!

HE GENTLY CHIDES THEM FOR THEIR DOUBT & THEY GIVE IN & DO AS HE'S INSTRUCTED THEM.

AFTER OFFERING A PRAYER, HE CALLS LAZARUS OUT OF THE TOMB.

OUT HE COMES...WALKING, BREATHING, ALIVE ONCE AGAIN AFTER BEING DEAD & BURIED FOR 4 DAYS.

HIS APPEARANCE MUST HAVE BEEN AS FRIGHTENING AS THE MIRACLE ITSELF, FOR HE WAS WRAPPED FROM HEAD TO TOE IN BURIAL CLOTHS.

JESUS INSTRUCTS THOSE NEARBY TO *"UNBIND HIM & LET HIM GO."*

THE RESULT OF THIS MIRACLE WAS THAT IT BROUGHT ABOUT FAITH FOR MANY BUT FOR OTHERS IT SERVED AS THE FINAL STRAW – JESUS MUST BE PUT TO DEATH.

THE PART OF THIS STORY THAT WE'VE LEFT OUT IS AN ENCOUNTER JESUS HAD WITH MARTHA – ONE OF THE SISTERS OF LAZARUS.

IT'S RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STORY & IS, PERHAPS, THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF ALL.

JOHN 11:17-27.

(After scripture)

IT IS COMMON & WITH GOOD REASON TO SUGGEST THAT AS WE LOOK AT THIS STORY OF THE RAISING OF LAZARUS, WE SHOULD PUT OURSELVES IN THE PLACE OF LAZARUS.

HE'S THE ONE WITH WHOM WE SHOULD MOST IDENTIFY.

THERE IS LOGIC TO THAT APPROACH.
WE ARE ALL DEAD IN SOME WAY, AREN'T WE?
MAYBE IT'S YOUR CAREER THAT HAS DIED.
PERHAPS IT'S YOUR FAMILY OR YOUR ZEST FOR LIVING.
MAYBE YOU'RE DEAD TO THE CRIES OF THE NEEDY IN YOUR MIDST.
WHATEVER IT IS, THERE IS AN ELEMENT OF DEATH IN ALL OF US.
WE ARE ALL IN NEED OF BEING CALLED FORTH FROM THE TOMBS THAT IMPRISON US.
WE ALL NEED TO HAVE THE BURIAL CLOTHS REMOVED.
WE ALL NEED TO BE "UNBOUND & LET GO."
WE ALL NEED THE RESURRECTION POWER THAT ONLY CHRIST CAN GIVE.
SO, YES, THERE IS GOOD REASON THAT WE ARE TOLD IT IS LAZARUS WITH WHOM WE SHOULD MOST IDENTIFY IN THIS STORY.

BUT I'D LIKE TO SUGGEST AN EVEN BETTER POSSIBILITY.
I THINK IT IS MARTHA WHO MORE CLOSELY REPRESENTS MOST OF US.
HAVEN'T YOU FELT HER AGONY WHEN JESUS FINALLY SHOWS UP A DAY LATE & A MIRACLE SHORT?
FOUR DAYS LATE TO BE MORE PRECISE.
HAVEN'T YOU WANTED TO LOOK GOD IN THE EYE & SAY, "*IF ONLY...*"
IT IS A GENTLE REBUKE, BUT A REBUKE NONETHELESS FROM MARTHA.
IMPLICIT IN HER WISTFUL REMARK IS A WHOLE HOST OF QUESTIONS.
"WHY DIDN'T YOU COME SOONER?"
"WHY DID YOU WAIT SO LONG?"
"WHY WEREN'T YOU HERE TO HELP?"
"WHY DID YOU LEAVE MARY & I ALONE TO DEAL WITH THIS?"
YOU HAVE ASKED MARTHA'S QUESTIONS YOURSELF, HAVEN'T YOU?
"WHY, GOD?"
"WHY DIDN'T YOU DO SOMETHING?"
"WHY DID YOU LEAVE ME ALL ALONE TO DEAL WITH THIS TRAGEDY?"
"MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

YES, I THINK IT IS MARTHA WITH WHOM WE CAN MOST IDENTIFY IN THIS STORY.
SHE FEELS WHAT WE SO OFTEN FEEL & SHE ASKS THE QUESTIONS OF GOD THAT WE SO OFTEN WANT TO ASK.

BUT THERE'S MORE.
EVEN AFTER SHE'S QUESTIONED JESUS ABOUT HIS DELAY IN COMING – EVEN THOUGH SHE KNOWS IT'S TOO LATE FOR ANYTHING TO BE DONE, MARTHA SAYS, "*BUT EVEN NOW I KNOW THAT GOD WILL GIVE YOU WHATEVER YOU ASK OF HIM.*"

YOU MAY HAVE SEEN THE GEORGE FREDERIC WATTS PAINTING ENTITLED, "HOPE."

YOU SEE A WOMAN SITTING ON A GLOBE, BLINDFOLDED, CLUTCHING A WOODEN LYRE WITH ONLY ONE STRING LEFT INTACT.

SHE SITS IN A HUNCHED POSITION, WITH HER HEAD LEANING TOWARDS THE INSTRUMENT, PERHAPS SO SHE CAN HEAR THE FAINT MUSIC SHE CAN MAKE WITH THE SOLE REMAINING STRING.

IT WAS PAINTED BY WATTS SHORTLY AFTER THE DEATH OF HIS ADOPTED DAUGHTER.

ACCORDING TO WATTS, "*HOPE NEED NOT MEAN EXPECTANCY. IT SUGGESTS HERE RATHER THE MUSIC WHICH CAN COME FROM THE REMAINING CHORD.*"

MAYBE THAT'S WHAT IT WAS FOR MARTHA & MAYBE THAT'S WHAT IT IS FOR YOU.

MAYBE MARTHA WASN'T EXPECTING JESUS TO BRING LAZARUS BACK TO LIFE BUT ONLY LONGING FOR SOMETHING GOOD TO REMAIN – SOME HOPEFUL SIGN THAT LIFE WOULD GO ON, IN SPITE OF THE SORROW SHE WAS EXPERIENCING.

AND ISN'T THAT TRUE FOR YOU IN THE LOSSES YOU ARE CALLED TO ENDURE?

YOU WANT THE ASSURANCE – THE HOPE – THAT SOMETHING MORE AWAITS YOU.

THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN JESUS & MARTHA CONTINUES & IT DEEPENS.

HE SAYS, "*YOUR BROTHER WILL RISE AGAIN.*"

MARTHA, ECHOING WHAT ANY GOOD & FAITHFUL JEW WOULD HAVE BELIEVED AT THE TIME, SAYS, "*I KNOW THAT HE WILL RISE AGAIN IN THE RESURRECTION ON THE LAST DAY.*"

HERE AGAIN, YOU CAN IDENTIFY WITH MARTHA, CAN'T YOU?

IT SOUNDS LIKE A PIOUS PLATITUDE THAT JESUS HAS OFFERED HER, DOESN'T IT – SOMETHING WE SAY WHEN SOMEONE HAS DIED TO JUST HELP THEM GET THROUGH THE PAIN THEY'RE EXPERIENCING.

"*YEAH, YEAH, JESUS – I KNOW ALL ABOUT THE RESURRECTION THING. BUT I WANT LAZARUS BACK NOW!*"

WHAT JESUS SAYS NEXT ARE WORDS THAT MANY OF YOU HAVE HEARD COUNTLESS TIMES.

THEY ARE WORDS THAT YOU HEAR AT A TIME OF DEATH NEARLY AS OFTEN AS YOU HEAR THE 23RD

PSALM: "*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.*"

NOW THOSE ARE WORDS YOU KNOW, AREN'T THEY?

THOSE ARE WORDS THAT MANY OF YOU COULD RECITE FROM MEMORY.

THEY ARE WORDS THAT OFFER US HOPE – WORDS THAT SUSTAIN US IN TIMES OF OUR DEEPEST SORROW & MOST PAINFUL GRIEF.

INTERESTINGLY, THOUGH, THAT'S NOT ALL THAT JESUS SAYS HERE.

OUR LENTEN SERIES IS ENTITLED THE QUESTIONS OF JESUS & IT HAS TAKEN US THIS LONG THIS MORNING TO GET TO OUR QUESTION FOR TODAY.

JESUS MAKES THIS BEAUTIFUL & PROVOCATIVE STATEMENT, BUT THEN HE ASKS MARTHA: "*DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?*"

LAST WEEK, WE SUGGESTED THAT WHEN JESUS ASKED THE DISCIPLES, “*WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?*,” IT WAS A QUESTION HE ASKS OF US AS WELL.

SO, TOO, WITH *THIS* QUESTION.

JESUS LOOKS AT YOU IN MUCH THE SAME WAY THAT HE LOOKED AT MARTHA.

HE SAYS, “*I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN ME, EVEN THOUGH THEY DIE, WILL LIVE. AND EVERYONE WHO LIVES & BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER DIE.*”

AND THEN HE ASKS, “*DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?*”

YES, YOU ARE MARTHA IN THIS STORY.

NOT SO FAST, THOUGH.

LOOK AT THE ANSWER MARTHA OFFERS TO THE QUESTION JESUS HAS ASKED HER.

IT’S NOT REALLY AN ANSWER AT ALL – NOT TO THE QUESTION HE HAS ASKED HER....OR IS IT?

“*YES, LORD, I BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD, THE ONE COMING INTO THE WORLD.*”

GO BACK AGAIN TO LAST WEEK’S PASSAGE & LAST WEEK’S QUESTION & REMEMBER PETER’S DECLARATION OF FAITH.

WAS IT NOT PRECISELY WHAT MARTHA HAS SAID HERE?

“*YOU ARE THE CHRIST – THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD.*”

YOU SEE, HERE IS WHY I THINK THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THIS STORY – EVEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE MIRACLE ITSELF.

BECAUSE, YOU SEE, MARTHA MAKES THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE* THE MIRACLE TAKES PLACE.

SHE MAKES THIS ENORMOUS DECLARATION OF FAITH WHILE HER BROTHER IS STILL WRAPPED UP IN BURIAL CLOTHS IN A TOMB.

THIS MIRACLE – LIKE SO MANY OF THE MIRACLES OF JESUS, ESPECIALLY IN JOHN’S GOSPEL – IS PRIMARILY A SIGN.

IT’S NOT THE MIRACLE ITSELF THAT IS AS IMPORTANT AS THAT TO WHICH IT POINTS.

THE MIRACLE OF THE RAISING OF LAZARUS POINTS US TO JESUS AS THE SOURCE OF ABUNDANT & ETERNAL LIFE.

AND HERE’S WHERE IT GETS TRICKY BECAUSE ABUNDANT & ETERNAL LIFE ISN’T SIMPLY SOMETHING THAT AWAITS US IN SOME FAR-OFF DISTANT FUTURE.

ABUNDANT & ETERNAL LIFE IS NOW.

THIS DAY – THIS HOUR – THIS MOMENT ---- ABUNDANT LIFE IS YOURS.

ETERNAL LIFE ISN’T CONFINED TO A TIME.

IT’S NOT SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE.

ETERNAL LIFE – RESURRECTION - IS A PERSON.

THAT’S WHAT JESUS SAID, ISN’T IT – “*I AM THE RESURRECTION...*”

AS WE LOOK AT HIM...AS WE TRUST IN HIM...AS WE PUT OUR HOPES IN HIM...ETERNAL LIFE IS OURS –
NOW.

YES, I BELIEVE THAT IT IS MARTHA WITH WHOM WE CAN MOST CLOSELY IDENTIFY IN THIS STORY.

BUT IF YOU DO, YOU HAVE TO GO ALL THE WAY WITH THAT IDENTIFICATION.

IN THE MIDST OF THE DEEPEST SORROW OF HER LIFE, WHEN JESUS ASKED “*DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?*,” SHE
UTTERED THE MOST POWERFUL OF ALL STATEMENTS OF FAITH.

HE ASKS YOU THE SAME QUESTION.

WHEN YOUR LIFE IS IN THE DEEPEST VALLEY, HE ASKS: “*DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?*”

“*DO YOU BELIEVE THAT JESUS IS THE RESURRECTION & THE LIFE & THAT WHOEVER LIVES & BELIEVES IN
HIM WILL NEVER DIE?*”

IF YOUR ANSWER IS A PROFESSION OF FAITH LIKE THAT OF MARTHA’S, ETERNAL LIFE CAN BEGIN FOR
YOU RIGHT HERE – RIGHT NOW. AMEN.

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