

“Now What?”

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

Death is awful. It rattles us, leaves us raw, and forces us to confront the terrible truth of our mortality. In an interview just days before he died, writer William Saroyan said, “Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case.” And then, in the haunting conclusion to his famous last words, Saroyan said, “Now what?” The truth is that no matter who you are or what you’ve done in this life, we are all on the same journey, and we will all die, and the question “Now what?” is the most important we will ever ask.

Today, our Gospel reading brings us face to face with death, and John goes to great lengths to recount the details of this confrontation. In the first part of John 11, we learn about the illness of Lazarus, and we also hear about his sisters’ attempts to let Jesus know how serious the situation was. Yet instead of rushing to Bethany to help His dying friend, Jesus deliberately and intentionally stayed where He was for two more days. Initially, He told His disciples that Lazarus would not die and that the “Son of man would be glorified” through his illness, but then later He plainly told them that Lazarus had died. The disciples must have been totally confused by the words and actions of Jesus, and things didn’t improve when they got to Bethany.

Upon their arrival, we are told that “when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days” (John 11:17). John is careful to record this detail because the number of days that Lazarus had already been in the grave was significant. You see, some of the rabbis of the day taught that the soul stayed near the body “for three days” and then departed as the body began to decay.¹ So in the minds of those who gathered to mourn, Jesus had not only missed the opportunity to heal His dying friend, but by the time He finally got there, even the spirit of Lazarus was gone. Like the bones in Ezekiel’s vision that were “very dry”, Lazarus was very dead. And it’s at this point – when all hope seems to be lost – that we begin to see the reason for Jesus’ bizarre behavior.

In verse 20, Martha comes out to greet Jesus, and you can feel the disappointment in her words as she says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” We can also sense the conflict within Martha as she follows her veiled accusation with a confession of faith: “But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” What Martha meant with these words is difficult to know, but when Jesus comforted Martha with the promise that her brother “will rise again,” it’s clear from her response that she was not anticipating a miracle in the present. In what sounds like a tone of polite resignation, Martha said to Jesus, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” In these words, she was giving the polite and proper “church” answer. Her response was theologically correct, and it would have been the dignified and appropriate thing to say as they stood in front of her brother’s grave...but that’s not how she was feeling.

I’ve been to too many funerals, and I’ve watched and listened as mourners stood in front of a casket and honored the decorum of the day by giving the dignified and appropriate response. But when death is present, that’s not what’s going on inside. Inside, we feel defeated. Inside, we feel alone. Inside, the disorienting reality of death is overwhelming, and the question, “Now what?” demands an answer that we cannot naturally give, no matter how proper and pious our words may sound.

That’s what death does. St. Paul calls death the “final enemy” (I Corinthians 15:26) and, in our grief, this enemy attacks us where we are most vulnerable, and there is nothing dignified or appropriate about it.

¹ *The Lutheran Study Bible*. Note on John 11:17.

Death and the horrible separation it brings is not what God intended for His creation, and it is not something in which God ever takes pleasure, and in this moment of Martha's grief, and with the question "Now what?" left unanswered, Jesus speaks to Martha in a way no one else could possibly speak: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

In these words, Jesus did more than offer Martha His condolences. In these words, Jesus did more than honor her grief or express His compassion. In these words, Jesus pointed to the *one and only place* where the enemy cannot exist. In these words, Jesus spoke of the *one and only place* where death cannot go. Here, Jesus revealed Himself as the defeater of death, and He showed His purpose in words of promise that transcended everything Martha was feeling in her heart and seeing with her eyes. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." This was more than impotent sympathy. Here, Jesus answered the question, "Now what?" Here, Jesus created a new reality and, just as God spoke the universe into existence in the beginning, Jesus was now speaking words of life into the presence of death. And there, in view of Martha and Mary and the parade of mourners, Jesus preached His answer into the silence of a putrid tomb...and life came out! "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." ⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

And, my friends, this matters to us today, because the same words of life that were spoken to Martha at the grave of her brother, *today* have been spoken to you. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." Today, in these words, Jesus Christ is proclaiming a resurrection *for you and for those you love*, and just as the Word of the Lord brought life to the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision and called Lazarus from his tomb, the Word of the Lord has preached life into you with a promise that the grave is not your final destination and that death is not your end.

The question, "Now what?" cannot be answered by this world. No political party can respond to this question. No "how to" morality can shed light on this mystery. No amount of financial wealth, no intellectual ideal, no social theory, *nothing* the world speaks can cut through the pall of silence and answer the question that death asks. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death, and no one escapes this truth, and yet to this ultimate question, *Jesus speaks*: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

"*Now what!?!*" Jesus answers this question with a resounding promise! These words of life change the way we understand death, and they absolutely change the way we experience life. To me, one of the most interesting elements in this story is the fact that Lazarus died again. How long he lived after walking out of the grave, we don't know. But the knowledge that the same Jesus who had called him out of the tomb also rose from the grave and promised eternal life to all who believe must have permeated every facet of his life. And that is exactly what this story means for you. You see, Jesus raised Lazarus *for you!* So that *you* will believe and so that you can live your life free of fear and full of gratitude to the One who has answered life's most important question. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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