Essential Question #5:

“Do You Need a Greater Hope?”

John 11:17-44

March 29, 2020

North UMC

The liturgy for the committal service—which is the ritual at the graveside—begins with this line: ‘In the midst of life, we are surrounded by death. From whence cometh our help?’

In the midst of life we are surrounded by death. I felt that in the weeks surrounding my father’s death in 2000. He died in late August. My grandfather died a month later and we had his service at the end of September. Between my father’s funeral and my grandfather’s funeral, I conducted four other funerals. I had a funeral two days after my father passed, and funeral three days before my grandfather died, and two more in between. I’m not superstitious but after performing over 300 funerals over the past 30 years I have come to believe in the old adage that death comes in twos and threes. In the midst of life we are surrounded by death, indeed.

Jesus and his closest friends were surrounded by death. One of his best friends, Lazarus, had died. He had been dead for four days. In ancient Jewish custom there was the belief that the soul hovered over the body for three days and only then did it depart. The wake was held in the home as his sisters and the mourners sat around the body for seven days, the first three they did not bath as an act of grieving. Only then, would they entomb the corpse in a cave. No chance now of him coming out of a mistaken coma. This was the final word on his life. In short, Lazarus was good and dead.

In the midst of life we are often surrounded by death. Doesn’t it seem that when troubles and tragedies happen that they happen all at once? That one fateful year when everything goes wrong and everyone gets sick? One of those stretches of time when you lose your job, lose your spouse, and the car falls apart? And now, in the midst of the pandemic, what often happens for us personally is a global phenomenon. The world is having one of those years. In the midst of life we are surrounded by death.

How do you respond when you are surrounded by the forces of death and destruction? Maybe you are like Martha. Martha’s faith was growing through the crisis. She believes that Jesus can do something for her brother, but she does not know what that could be. All she knows is that she has seen him do incredible things for others. She also believes in a general day of resurrection that Judaism taught would happen at the very end of time, but that is a long way away. When Jesus tells her to believe, her confession is spot on: You are the Anointed One, the Son of God. And yet, a few hours later, at the graveside the reality of her brother’s death is all she can see. Like so many others in John’s Gospel, her faith is developing slowly. Like Martha, you have faith but it is so unclear what it means right now and out of the crisis your faith is growing in ways you cannot fully comprehend.

Or maybe you are like Mary. Mary’s faith was overwhelmed by the crisis. Like her sister, she too leaves the house of mourning to meet Jesus on the road. But unlike her sister, Mary offers no confession of faith, no tentative act of trust. And yet, she trusts enough to fall at his feet in an act of spontaneous worship, a physical sign of her faith. Her faith is overwhelmed by the stench of death. All the crying, all the praying, the perpetual sight of her brother’s body stretched out on the table has gotten the best of her. Like Mary, you still have faith—that’s why you are watching this broadcast—even though your crisis has left you speechless.

Perhaps you are like the mourners. The mourners’ faith was clueless in the crisis. They were following the custom of grieving. They were wearing the sackcloth, they were sitting beside the sisters, they were offering the traditional prayers, and they were wailing and crying. Lest we are too harsh, we must acknowledge that this too was an act of faith, a customary and traditional expression but of faith nonetheless. Unlike Martha and Mary, they did not have faith in the possibility of Jesus being able to do anything about it. Their faith was limited by, contained by, the reality of death. Like the mourners, your faith is being contained by the reality of death. Your ability to find hope now is constrained by your limited faith.

All of them needed a greater hope.

Today, do you need a greater hope? Yes, you have faith, but faith is hope spread out over time. ‘Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,’ Hebrews says, ‘the conviction of things not seen.’ Do you need a greater hope for these troubled times?

It is my privilege to say this morning, Hear the Good News: Jesus Christ is our greater hope. Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One, is the greater hope we need.

Jesus Christ is the greater hope because he is the resurrection and the life. ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ we are looking for, that fulfills our faith, empowers our faith, directs our faith. ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ for a world that is surrounded by death.

What does me mean when he says, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’? Jesus Christ is the source of life. As God Incarnate, he has been and is and always will be the animating power of God’s love that gives and sustains creation. The opening hymn of John’s Gospel previews this statement: ‘All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life.’ Christ is the source of all life.

More than that, Jesus Christ is the source of renewed life. Jesus Christ is the source of renewed life. He is the embodiment of God’s power that revives and restores our lives. He is the healing balm, the bread that feeds us, the water that refreshes us, the light that guides us out of destruction and into restoration. Everything that tears us down, that threatens to destroy us, that damages and wounds us, Christ is the power that overcomes it and heals us. Again, that hymn in the first chapter celebrates that Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life that restores our lives: ‘In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’

Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ now and for the future. Martha’s limited faith only saw a distant hope of resurrection. But Jesus said ‘I am’ right now. His resurrected life is available for us now. Yes, indeed he is the source of our eternal life. But that everlasting life begins now.

What is strange to me is that the creators of the lectionary and the writer of the Gospel has this resurrection story *before* Jesus’ resurrection. Lent is hardly a season for new life; that will come after Easter Sunday. And yet, we need it now. We need to see this greater hope while we are in the midst of a season of sadness. We need preliminary signs of the greater hope while the pandemic is going on. Today, we get that greater hope. Right now, Jesus gives us ‘a foretaste of glory divine,’ as the Gospel hymn says.

Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ for the individual and society. His resurrection power overcomes both the individual crises we face but also overcomes the social forces of death and destruction. His resurrection life is as intimate as the anxiety in your heart and as vast as the sociopolitical and economic forces that destroy nations. His life overcomes poverty and despair, war and disease, pollution and prejudice. It is the greater hope that encompasses all creation.

When Jesus says, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ he is showing us what is at the heart of God. He is revealing to us that God is a God of life. It is God’s will and God’s mission to give us life, to protect our lives, and to restore our lives. God is not the author of disease, destruction, discrimination or domination. God never makes an alliance with evil. For all the mysteries about life and death, about suffering and tragedy, the Gospel—the Good News—of Jesus Christ proclaims that God is life. While I cannot be certain how God is doing it, this one thing I can confirm: God is not making people sick.

Jesus also shows us that God understands our lives. This story gives us a glimpse into the heart of Jesus. So often the Bible is short on psychological details about him, but here we see his emotions. He was ‘greatly disturbed in spirit,’ he was ‘deeply moved,’ he wept. These words connote anger, not just sadness. His eyes are doing more than getting moist; he is wailing and shaking.

He is angry at the situation. He is grieving their inability to believe even though they have heard him over and over describe his relationship with God and seen over and over his power to heal and feed. He is angry at the power of death and evil still reigns in this moment. Most of all, he is angry because his friend has died a needless death.

If Jesus is the embodiment of God—we know what God is like because of who Jesus is—then what we see here is that God empathizes with us. When we cry, God cries. When we hurt, God’s heart breaks. God is not just some impersonal life force. God is a God of deep compassion and solidarity with all victims of suffering. In our worst moments, in our deepest despair, in our greatest need God is there with us. God is suffering with us so that God can lift us out of the suffering with resurrected life.

But what are words—even the Word of God. Talk is cheap. And Jesus knows it. The great ‘I am’ puts the resurrection and the life into action. Jesus orders the mourners to get out the crowbar and move the stone from the entrance. He hollers into the cave, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ and his friend staggers out wrapped in burial clothes and the mourners begin stripping them away.

We express our trust by working with Christ who is the resurrection and the life. ‘Faith without works is dead’ said James and we participate in the greater hope when we put our faith in action to protect and restore life. Christ is at work in our lives and the world giving life, protecting life, and restoring life. There are signs of this greater hope in the world. We see it in medical professionals restoring life. We see it in service providers protecting life. Christ is Lord of all and he is the Lord of life working in human history to give us opportunities to reject evil and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves so that we can be agents of his greater hope through our ministries of mercy, justice and peace.

We express our trust by praying with Christ who is the resurrection and the life. Look closely at Jesus’ prayer just before he calls forth Lazarus. It is not a prayer request, an intercession, or a petition. It is a prayer of thanksgiving. ‘Father, I thank you.’ He is thanking God in advance of the raising. He is thanking God for God going ahead and preparing the way before anyone can see the results. This is how we should express our faith in the God of life. We should be giving thanks to God right now, in the middle of our grief. Our thanksgiving should disrupt our anxiety. Our thanksgiving should preempt our despair. For every dour and depressing news article you hear, go outside and look around at the little signs of God’s new life and give God thanks in anticipation of God completing this life-giving work.

The prayers of the St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig preempted and disrupted communism in East Germany. Beginning in 1982, St. Nicholas, whose music director was Bach in the 18th century, began holding prayer services for peace. Every Monday at 5pm Christians gathered to sing, read the Beatitudes, and pray for peace and freedom. It would be another seven years before they would see the beginnings of an answer to their prayers. By 1989, the prayer meeting had become a gathering place for citizens so much so that on May 8 the police barricaded the streets around the church to prevent people from attending.

But the forces of death could not stop their prayers. The people kept coming and by September peaceful demonstrations broke out in nearby Karl Marx Square. The Monday Demonstrations went on for the next three years until the collapse of communism.

In the midst of life we are surrounded by death—the forces of death and disease, of domination and discrimination—death tries to barricade our hearts and minds. The committal liturgy does not end there. It goes on to ask: ‘From whence cometh our help?’ And the reply: ‘Our help is in the name of the Lord who created heaven and earth. God who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit that dwells in you.’

We all need a greater hope this morning, and the Good News is that we have this greater hope in Jesus Christ who is the resurrection and the life. Amen.