

Hard to Believe

April 10, 2011

John 11:1-45

Whitefish UMC

- ✦ “Hard to believe,” the commentator said a couple of days ago, but a lot of federal employees live paycheck to paycheck. One young woman, an Iraq war veteran now employed at Fort Bragg as a civilian contractor, said: “Hard to believe, but a lot of people think it’s no big deal if we don’t get paid for awhile—after all, it is just a “deferred payment” to them. But who is going to tell my baby that her formula will be deferred until Congress figures the budget out?”
- ✦ Hard to believe a lot of things going on these days. Why should the people of Japan have to endure another earthquake? Why should the little ones suffering from leukemia that were treated with our Shelby in Seattle have suffered relapses and death? Why should the people of Cote d’Ivoire have to suffer so because of a delusional tyrant who won’t give up his claim to the nation’s presidency? Ditto with the people of Libya.
- ✦ We could go on and on. I don’t know about you, but I need a little Easter, a little resurrection. I’ve been thinking about pulling out the Easter stuff. Easter is only two weeks away, but somehow I am not quite ready to decorate for Spring and Easter. It has still been snowing. The snow has never been better all winter up on Big Mountain. We’re still dressing in sweaters, and our skin is a grey as the Whitefish skies in April.

- ✦ But here we are this Sunday with an almost-Easter scripture text, even in the deep of Lent. We haven't come to Easter, yet; but we have this resuscitation text. A man is being raised from the dead, not raised in the same way that Jesus will be raised, not resurrected, but still raised from death to life. I hear John, the gospel writer saying, in effect, "Whenever Jesus shows up, even if he shows up late in Lent, the dead begin to rise, life begins to break out."
- ✦ Let's look at the story of the raising of Lazarus to see just how Jesus confronts and then conquers the powers of sickness and death. It is, for us, as it was for Jesus' friends Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, a matter of life and death.
- ✦ For starters, it is clear that Jesus is not untouched or unmoved by physical and spiritual destruction. He takes fatal illness seriously and personally. Going to the tomb of his dead friend Lazarus (some say this was the "beloved disciple" referred to in John's gospel, the one to whom Mary, the mother of Jesus, is entrusted at Jesus' death. I even have one colleague who makes a good case that the writer of the gospel of John is really Lazarus), Jesus encounters the sisters Mary and Martha of Bethany. And when Jesus sees Mary weeping, he is greatly disturbed in spirit and is deeply moved. He begins to weep himself, prompting some onlookers to say, "See how he loved him!"
- ✦ What a powerful image this is: God's own son, the King of Kings, the Lord of lords, so overcome by grief over the loss of his friend, and by anger over the destructive power of death, that he breaks down in tears.
- ✦ Death is not a minor annoyance for Jesus. It is something that affects him profoundly—so profoundly that he risks his own death to go to

his friends' side. His disciples warn him against going where he might be caught in the web of his opponents—in Jerusalem—and Bethany is only a couple of miles away from that city of power and authority. Yet Jesus risks his own life. Indeed whoever wrote the gospel of John implies that it is Jesus' raising of Lazarus that leads directly to Jesus' own death on the cross.

- ✦ Yes, Jesus is moved by Lazarus's death and by the sisters, his dear friends Martha and Mary's grief. He is overwhelmed by emotion when he sees Martha and Mary, and he cries.
- ✦ But then, suddenly, another group of onlookers in the story speaks up and makes a less sympathetic observation: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man Lazarus from dying?" Good question. It's a question many of us find ourselves asking often, if we're honest.
- ✦ Think about it. Why doesn't the universe-creating God create miraculous cures for little children with cancer? Why doesn't the death-conquering Christ beat the disease that causes those we love to suffer so? Why doesn't the apostle-inspiring Spirit of God give special powers to peacemakers seeking to bring wholeness and justice to nations longing for restoration?
- ✦ These are the great questions for people of faith, and the questions that cause many post-modern people to reject the whole idea of a loving, all powerful God.
- ✦ Martha admits that she expects a straightforward healing miracle when she says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She is irritated that Jesus didn't heal her brother, and she is confident that he could have.

- ✦ But then Jesus says something very interesting, and very unexpected. Instead of explaining to Martha that he is going to raise Lazarus in just a few minutes, he says, *“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?**”*
- ✦ Rather than promising Martha a miracle, he invites her to trust him to work for new life. There’s a big difference between these two. Instead of saying, “I’m going to step in and make everything okay,” Jesus says, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” He promises that the dead will rise, but he doesn’t predict just how.
- ✦ So what does Martha do in response to this invitation? She says “yes.” She believes. She proclaims, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”
- ✦ The very same invitation is extended to us today. Jesus says to us, in the vortex of our physical and spiritual illnesses: “I am the resurrection and the life...Do you believe this” Do you believe that I am working for radical new life? Do you believe that I am the resurrection, the one who conquers death? Do you believe that I am leading you, right now, in so many unexpected ways, from dying to rising? Hard to believe.
- ✦ And the sad truth is that many of us, even if we profess to believe, calling ourselves Christians, don’t act much like it.
- ✦ It’s just as in this old joke... “One day a pastor was building a trellis to support a climbing vine. As he pounded away, he noticed a little boy standing nearby and watching him. The kid didn’t say a word, so the pastor kept on working, thinking the little boy would leave, but he

- didn't. Finally, the pastor asked, "Well, son, are you trying to pick up some pointers on gardening?" "No, the little boy replied, I'm just waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with a hammer."
- ✦ Awhile ago, Tom and I watched the old movie, "Lord Jim," filmed in 1964 and based on the novel by Joseph Conrad. It starred Peter O'Toole, youthful and handsome and with the most incredibly blue eyes, as Jim. In the book and the film, the young sailor Jim, rising through the ranks of the British Navy in Victorian England, makes a bad and costly decision that haunts him for the rest of his life. Even though he tries to redeem himself, and does, through acts of courage, compassion, and commitment, he can never get beyond the feeling of inadequacy and unworthiness. And a full and satisfying life is denied him, as a result of his unwillingness to move beyond his earlier failure.
 - ✦ A few weeks ago, I helped lead a Walk to Emmaus. Do you remember the scripture that gives that spiritual renewal weekend its name? Two people are walking along a road on Easter evening. A stranger joins them and they recount the events of Holy Week to him. And then they say, "Some women came and told us that Jesus had risen and that he lives!" They couple on the road to Emmaus weren't sure they believed the women. They found what they claimed to be hard to believe.
 - ✦ We asked the women in the Emmaus weekend this question: "Do you believe the women?" We experienced women standing up and rejoicing in the possibility of new life, of acceptance, of resurrection.

- Even though the problems they left behind for a weekend would still be there when they returned.
- ✦ One woman, I have learned, returned home to find that her husband of eight months had left her. Now there's a true test of whether we believe in resurrection in the midst of death. But the community surrounded her with love and prayers, and she is surviving, standing up, and acting as if she believes in new life, even in the midst of the death of her marriage.
 - ✦ An Episcopal priest named Robert Morris speaks about the commonplace and frequently unnoticed ways that people rise above their loneliness and fear as "ordinary resurrections." He points out that the origin of the word "resurrection" is the Greek word *anastasis*, which he notes, means "standing up again," and as he puts it unpretentiously, "We all lie down. We all rise up. We do this every day." The same word, he notes, is used in our Scripture today: "I am the resurrection and the life." And so, he notes, the resurrection does not wait for Easter.
 - ✦ What about you? Do you believe Jesus when he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."
 - ✦ I have told you a few times about a song I find especially meaningful by John Bell. And I offer it again today. One of the lines keeps running around in my head and heart. "If you take the hand of the redeemer, will you carry on as if he's dead? Will you say instead that love has triumphed. Hell has lost and heaven is here instead."
 - ✦ So, even if you believe, will you carry on as if he's dead? Or will you believe that Jesus offers redemption, forgiveness, and new life—even

if you've messed up in the past, even if you suffer unbearably, even in the face of death?

- ✦ It's like the country song that says: "We fall down, we get up. We fall down, we get up. And the saints are just the sinners who fall down and get up."
- ✦ Everyday we are offered the miracle of resurrection. Even in the midst of Lent, we know the end of the story. Even if it doesn't yet feel like Easter or Spring, why not step out of the stinky stuff that keeps you from enjoying the abundant life offered to you in Jesus Christ, the living one.
- ✦ And live as if you believe him. Loving, healing, forgiving, including, freeing, teaching, and celebrating the Good News of God's love in you.
- ✦ May it be so. Amen.