

March 26, 2023
John 11:1-45

Lent 5
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The End is Life”

“I am the resurrection and the life.”

When I am asked what has been the most difficult or challenging worship service at which I have presided, the answer is easy: the funeral for the son of my cousin Mark and his wife Janet in New Hampshire in September 2010. Mark was one of my many cousins in the Laustsen family, and I had presided at Mark and Janet’s marriage in New Jersey in 1985. Mark and Janet had two sons, Mark Jr. and Stephen, and eventually moved to New Hampshire where Mark established a very successful home construction business. We saw them occasionally at family gatherings, but with our moves our times together had grown infrequent, even though they were among my favourite cousins on my father’s side.

But everything changed when I got a phone call from my cousin Donna Marie asking me if I had heard about young Mark. Their oldest son was 23 and working near their New Hampshire home when his truck was hit on an interstate highway, killing him immediately. We were beginning to process this horrific news when our phone rang and I heard Mark’s tear-filled voice saying “Jeff, we need you.” At that moment, we knew what we needed to do; we immediately made plans to travel to New Hampshire for the funeral, at which I would be presiding. On the drive from Long Island to New Hampshire, I was pondering how I could possibly handle presiding at such a service; even though I had been ordained for over 25 years and presided at hundreds of funerals, this would be an entirely different experience, and as we approached our destination I still did not know how I could summon the strength to lead worship while dealing with my own grief and sadness. When we arrived at Mark and Janet’s home, we spent several moments simply hugging them and crying with them, and then began to talk about the arrangements for Mark’s funeral. Because of the anticipated size of the crowd, the service was being moved to the local Congregational church, the largest building in town. We talked about hymns and Bible readings, but even as the service took shape I was filled with anxiety and doubt, wondering how I could manage to keep my composure in front of my grieving family as well as hundreds of mourners on that sad day.

When the time of the funeral service approached, the large church was filled with mourners, with my family in the front rows. I sat in the presider’s chair as the organist played the prelude music, still not knowing how I could get through this

service. But then one of the most memorable experiences of my life happened: I felt a comforting, strengthening presence assuring me that all would be well, and when the organ music ended it felt like arms were lifting me off the chair and giving me strength to stand and lead worship. I know it was God's presence that was abiding with me at that moment, as God was present among those gathered to mourn the death of our brother Mark as our Lord was present when people gathered to mourn the death of another brother, Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha. Bethany was a Judean town close to Jerusalem, and Mary and Martha are identified in Luke's Gospel as women who welcomed Jesus into their home and offer an important lesson on not allowing our busyness to distract us from listening to the Word of God present in Jesus: "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.*" (Luke 10:41-42). In today's Gospel lesson, we learn that Mary and Martha have a brother named Lazarus, who is suffering from an illness. John identifies Mary as "*the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair*" (John 11:2), even though this incident is not reported until 12:3. The sisters send a message to Jesus that "*he whom you love is ill*" (11:3), expecting him to leave for Bethany immediately so that he might heal their brother from his illness as he has frequently done. But instead of leaving to come to their home and heal their brother, Jesus turns the focus away from the illness *per se* to the illness as an occasion for revelation: "*This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*" (11:4). Lazarus' illness is not ultimately about death, for Jesus will give life to Lazarus. This gift of life will reveal the glory of God that is present in Jesus, who is "*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*" (1:14). This gift of life will be revelatory of Jesus' relationship with God; the glorification of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel refers to his death, resurrection, and ascension ("*His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.*" – 12:16). So even though Jesus loved this family, he intentionally "*stayed two days longer in the place where he was*" (11:6).

After the two days had passed, Jesus says to his disciples, "*let us go to Judea again*" (11:7). But the disciples fear for his safety, warning him that the people there "*were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?*" (11:8). Jesus answers their concerns by pointing to the limited time that he has to accomplish his work, and that he must be about his work while it is still day and will not be hindered by whatever dangers await him in Judea. His use of "hours" (*hora*) recalls the use of "hour" in the Fourth Gospel as a metaphor for the time of Jesus' death ("*The hour*

has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" – 12:23). The prospect of Jesus' death or the death of the disciples is not the stumbling block; walking apart from the light is what will cause those who are apart from the light to stumble (*"And many among them will stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken."* – Isaiah 8:15).

Jesus then announces to his disciples that *"our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to awaken him"* (11:11). Jesus' knowledge of Lazarus' death is another instance of his ability to know all things (*"He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do"* – 6:6). "Fallen asleep" is a New Testament euphemism for death (*"The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised"* – Matthew 27:52). This disciples misunderstand Jesus' words to mean normal sleep, not death, and so they assume that *"if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right"* (11:12). John resolves this confusion by inserting an explanatory comment, and then reports that *"Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead.'"* (11:14). But instead of regretting that he had not left sooner to be with Lazarus before he had died, Jesus explains that his death is an occasion for revelation as well as for the disciples to come to faith. Thomas epitomizes the obedient disciple as he encourages the others to *"let us go also,"* but his obedience has an ironic edge because he cannot yet fully understand what the Judean trip will entail for Jesus and his disciples; he merely sees it as a time *"that we may die with him."* (11:16).

When Jesus finally arrives at Bethany, he discovers that the friends and neighbours of Mary and Martha are sitting *shiva* with them, the traditional Jewish period of mourning. John reports that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days, which underscores the finality of Lazarus' death. According to popular Jewish belief at the time, the soul hovered around the body in the grave for three days after death, hoping to re-enter the body. But after the third day, when the soul *"sees that the colour of its face has changed,"* the soul leaves the body for good. When Martha hears that Jesus has finally arrived, she goes to meet him while Mary stays in the house with the fellow mourners. Her greeting makes the implied request in 11:3 explicit: *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* (11:21). In Judaism, lament and complaint belonged to the language of faith (*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* – Psalm 22:1) and does not cast doubt on Martha's faith. This edge of complaint gives greater impact to Martha's statement of confidence in Jesus that *"even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."* (11:22). When Jesus tells her *"your brother will rise again,"* Martha interprets this as referring to a future resurrection of the dead on the last day (*"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and*

some to shame and everlasting contempt” – Daniel 12:2). But Jesus reveals that he is speaking of more than this resurrection on the last day when he proclaims that *“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”* (11:25-26). In one of several “I am” statements in John, Jesus identifies himself as the fulfillment of eschatological expectations for the fulfillment of God’s promises. The promise of resurrection and life is not lodged in some distant event, but is already available in the person of Jesus: *“Jesus affirms his sovereignty over the present and future lives of believers.”* (Gail O’Day). For Jesus to be the “resurrection” means that physical death has no power over believers; their future is determined by their faith in Jesus, not by their death. For Jesus to be the “life” means that the believers’ present is also determined by Jesus’ power of life as experienced in his gift of eternal life, the good news that *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* (3:16).

Jesus ends his proclamation with a question to Martha that is also a critical question for all who hear his words: *“Do you believe this?”* Belief in Jesus as the incarnate Word of God is essential, because *“unless one believes in Jesus and his word, the transformed life he offers is rendered void.”* (O’Day). Martha’s response is in the language of confession: *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world”* (11:27). Her statement is an early form of a creed (*credo*, “I believe”); she confesses Jesus as Messiah, Son of God, and the one coming into the world (*“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world”* – 1:9). When Martha returns home and reports to Mary that *“the Teacher is here and is calling for you,”* Mary shows herself to be one of the obedient sheep who heed the voice of their Good Shepherd when *“she got up quickly and went to him”* (11:28-29). Her fellow mourners accompany her *“because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there”* (11:31); but when Mary comes into Jesus’ presence, she kneels at his feet and greets Jesus with the same words her sister used: *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”* (11:32). Even though both Mary and Martha had expected Jesus to intervene on their brother’s behalf, her kneeling at his feet is further evidence of her continuing devotion to Jesus.

John reports that *“when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved”* (11:33). There is some difference of opinion as to what this may mean; Jesus may be moved with sorrow and compassion in the presence of such mourning, or he may be upset with the mourners who have intruded on this scene: *“Jesus had rejoiced that Lazarus’ death would be an occasion for his disciples to come to faith; now this miracle must be shared with those who do not believe that he is the Son of God.”* (O’Day). Jesus’

exchange with the crowd confirms that Lazarus' death is not longer a family matter; it is now a public event. When he asks the crowd "*'where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'*" (11:34). "Laid" (*tithemi*) functions here as a technical term for death ("*And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and his tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there*" – 19:42). When he hears the crowds' response, "*Jesus began to weep*" (11:35); Jesus' tears are his public acknowledgment of the pain that death causes in human life: "*The scale of Jesus' act can only be recognized if the bitterness of physical death is not minimized*" (Rudolf Schnackenberg). The reaction of the crowd is mixed; some see it as evidence of Jesus' love for Lazarus, while others react with skepticism: "*could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying*" (11:37). Once again, the response of the crowd is not to be trusted ("*The crowd standing there through it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.'*" – 12:29). The scene reaches its climax when "*Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb*" (11:38). The report that Lazarus had been dead four days and the stench of the body underscores the reality of the death; but Jesus' response again points to the revelatory significance of the miracle he is about to perform: "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*" (11:40). After the stone is removed, Jesus lifts up his eyes to pray:

- "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." – 11:41-42.

Jesus' prayer is one of thanksgiving for his relationship with God. It is also an act of doxology; Jesus wants to direct the eyes of those who gather at the tomb toward God, so that God's glory might be seen in the miracle. God is the one who has given Jesus the power over life and death and the power to raise the dead ("*Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes*" – 5:21).

The miracle itself is narrated leanly; it is to Jesus' voice that Lazarus responds when Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "*Lazarus, come out!*" *The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.*" (11:43-44). Lazarus is referred to as "the dead man," emphasizing the sweep of the miracle Jesus has performed. As he is still in his burial clothes, Jesus orders the crowds to "*unbind him, and let him go.*" The result of this sign is that many of the mourners "*who had come with Mary and seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*" (11:45).

- “This sign reveals Jesus’ divine power over life and death, and many came to believe in him as a result. While the sign reveals Jesus’ power to give life, it is an important factor leading to his death.” – Francis Martin and William Wright.

The raising of Lazarus is the seventh and last sign in the Fourth Gospel that point to the miracles of Jesus as signs of God’s work and will that is present in Jesus. It was a sign of the hope that is at the heart of our Christian faith, that while we will all experience death and grief because we are human, because we live in the hope of resurrection and new life in Christ we know that death is not the final word for us. Jesus came to mourn and weep with the mourners in Bethany; he also came to offer them the assurance that their day would come when he would gather all God’s people into their eternal home where God would “*wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*” (Revelation 21:3-4).

- “But the proclamation of Easter Day is that all is well. And as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well but as one who has faced the Cross in all its obscenity as well as in all its glory, who has known one way or another what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, his will, not ours is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him, in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream. Christ our Lord is risen.” – Frederick Buechner.

Mark’s funeral was the most challenging worship service at which I have presided, but it was also a holy occasion, because amid the grief and sorrow that filled that sanctuary was the assurance that our Lord was with us as Jesus was with the mourners in Bethany. Our Lord wept as we wept that day; but Christ also gave us the word that only the one who is the Word of God can offer: the assurance that death is not the end for those who trust in the Lord, because if we have been united through our baptism into Christ in a death like his, “*we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*” (Romans 6:5). As Christ’s presence gave me the strength to lead worship on that sad evening and share God’s hope-filled word, God is present with us in our times of sorrow and pain, comforting us as he assures us that the day will surely come when our Lord gathers us into our eternal home, wipes every tear from our eyes, and assures us that while we will experience moments of sorrow, grief, and pain, we live in the blessed assurance that “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever .. his the loving purpose solely to preserve them pure and holy.*” (ELW Hymn 781).

The end is life! Amen.