

John 11:1-45

"Resurrection and Life"

When I was growing up, I attended a church that had many activities for children to try to encourage them to read the Bible and memorize scripture passages. We played a game on a regular basis called "Sword Drill." The boys and girls would stand in a straight line, each holding a Bible that was closed in one hand. Then, the leader would say a scripture reference and the first person to find the scripture could read it aloud. That was the prize for being able to find it....you got to read it aloud. If you knew where certain scriptures were found in the Bible, it was coveted to be the person to read that scripture. For example, John 3:16...we all knew it by heart and could say it without looking but being able to find it and read it quickly was something everyone wanted to do. Another favorite that all wanted to read was John 11:35 which is the shortest verse in the Bible--"Jesus wept." We all knew it by heart, of course, but actually reading those two short words was a prize of sorts. We would usually smile as we read it and look around to see if others were looking at us.

"Jesus wept" is the shortest verse, of course in the King James Version of the Bible. Even modern translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) which is what we usually read from in worship, only adds two more words to the verse, "Jesus began to weep." This is not the only place in the New Testament where Jesus cries. He also cries as he looks out over Jerusalem and weeps for her citizens, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37) There is a chapel built in the spot in Jerusalem where by tradition Jesus spoke those words. The chapel is named Dominus Flavit which means God cries.

Jesus showed great emotion when he arrived in Bethany, a village a few miles outside of Jerusalem. That is where his good friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. Jesus had spent many a good evening in their home eating and drinking and sharing good times together, as close friends would do. We all can remember the story of Mary and Martha as Jesus visited in their home and Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to him while Martha busily went about the chores of preparing a meal and cleaning up. We rarely get a glimpse of Lazarus except to hear his name but in this story from John, Lazarus is the center of attention. That is because Lazarus died and the sisters sent for Jesus and he delayed his coming until after Lazarus had been in the tomb for 3 days.

In the ancient world, people would often hire professional mourners to mourn with them as they held numerous funeral rituals over the course of a week or more. It was considered impolite and not respectful of the dead to simply bury them and be done with it. People had to show their respect for the dead by visiting the family many times over and eating and drinking with them to bring them comfort. When Jesus and his disciples arrived at Bethany, the funeral ceremonies were in their fourth day. Lazarus had been put in the tomb quickly because they did not embalm bodies. Jesus first encountered Martha when we arrived in Bethany at their home. She expressed her grief to Jesus and told him that if he had come earlier her brother would not have died. Jesus comforted her with the words, "Your brother will rise again." Martha had faith that Lazarus would rise again in the resurrection at the end of time, but Jesus spoke his words of faith and comfort to her that we all know as one of Jesus' "I AM" sayings. "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." (25-26). Martha expresses faith in Jesus and in what he said to her.

Then Jesus encounters the other sister, Mary, who said the same thing to Jesus as her sister had said. Both faulted Jesus for being too late to heal their brother. Jesus looked around at the sisters weeping and all the professional mourners who were weeping with them and it moved him to emotion also. "Jesus wept." Those

who saw Jesus weeping judged rightly, "See how he loved him!" But others were quick to judge, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" This lack of faith greatly disturbed Jesus and as he came to the tomb, he did something that none of them expected him to do.

"Take away the stone," Jesus ordered. Martha then responded with another verse that we kids liked to read from the KJV, "Lord, he stinketh," which now reads, "Lord, there is a stench because he has been dead four days." (39) Jesus prepares them to see "the glory of God" and they removed the stone. Then, Jesus called Lazarus to come out of the grave, after praying aloud to God so all could hear him. Lazarus would have been wrapped in many bands of cloth, much like a mummy and they would have had to unwind him partway so he could move his feet. As he hobbled back to life, people removed all the cloth and he was soon sitting up and talking with his sisters and friends once again.

This miracle of resurrection is a precursor to what will come next....Jesus' own death and resurrection. The result of this miracle is that it so enraged the religious authorities of his day that they wanted to kill Jesus immediately, and then in the next chapter of John, they wanted to kill Lazarus also. They not only blamed the miracle worker but the miracle receiver even though he had no choice in returning to life again. He was commanded by Jesus to live.

We are living in times where death and sorrow are constant reminders of the frailty of life. The virus threat in our society at this moment is a real threat to us all. We do not like giving up our freedom of movement or our ability to go out into society and enjoy what we like to do. We do not like shortages in our stores because of panic buying and fear of some. We want things to return to normal. Part of our being mourns this sad state of affairs. We long for new life to be given to us and to our society.

The words of Jesus are very appropriate for this day and age. "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." Jesus had power over death both for his good friend Lazarus and for himself. When death became a challenge, Jesus was able to overcome it with God's power working within him. Jesus has power over the threat of death today too. Jesus is our hope and help in times such as we live in. Jesus cares for us as much as he cared for his close friends at Bethany. Jesus weeps along with us when we suffer.

Fear is the order of the day for many people. They have no support system to sustain them when life becomes challenging. They despair and wonder what the outcome will be. Those of us who have faith in God through Jesus Christ need not despair. As Saint Paul said to the Church at Rome, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (14:7-8) Our lives are bound up in our faith in God. Our faith sustains us and keeps us even when we go through times that we question. God will always be with us and God will keep us through every situation, even when the times get hard.

I think about our fathers and mothers and their parents and the times they endured. The Great Depression, the two World Wars and other wars that followed, economic ups and downs of every kind, all things that seem to exceed this present time and make it seem more like an inconvenience rather than a major threat for most of us. They had to keep their faith in God and the closeness of their ties of family and friends to sustain them and carry them into the future. We need to do the same, to know that God is the God of the future as well as the present and there is nothing in this life or in the life to come that will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So, be strong in faith and know that God is with us and will keep us close to God as we continue to live and love and show our love to all in our world.