

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Easter Sunday

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Text: John 11:17-26

Title: “The God We Can Know: Knowing God’s Possibilities”

Okay, let me begin by saying I think this story is a little creepy. Not the part you just heard but later in the story. I didn’t read the whole story because it is so long but if you haven’t heard it before, it ends with Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. He comes out of the tomb still wrapped in his stinking grave clothes. That’s the creepy part.

Talking with my son on the phone this last week I asked him what he and Aimee were up to that night. He told me they were getting some odds and ends done and then planning to watch “The Walking Dead”. I don’t know where his interest in such shows comes from—must be his mother—but in part I think he watches them as a way to differentiate himself from his father because I have no interest in such dramas having to do with Zombies or other living dead themes. It’s just not something I’m interested in thinking about, let alone consider entertaining. Maybe those of you who are fans of the show can enlighten me sometime, but I just don’t get it.

And yet, here we are on Easter Sunday dealing with a story about death and God’s power to bring new life as experienced in Jesus. Here we are listening to a story about a man named Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead which sort of makes him “The Walking Dead” doesn’t it? Which again is why I find this story a little creepy, because death is creepy. It’s the one thing, though, that we all have in common, from which none of us can escape. Thinking about all the characters in this story:

- Martha, Mary, and Jesus grieving the loss of Lazarus
- Their friends and family who came to comfort them in their grief
- The disciples who came with Jesus to Bethany
- The crowds who came to hear Jesus
- Those whom Jesus had healed before, including the blind man
- All the people of Jesus’ day
- All the people in the generations since that day who have heard or read these stories
- All the people of faith who have followed the way of Christ
- All the way down to us, who are reading this story this year, in 2015, about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

What all of us, past, present--those who will live in the future--what we ALL have in common is that every single one of us is a creature of time. We are all faced with coming to terms with our own mortality and that of those we love. We are creatures of time embodied in these fragile

frames. How are we supposed to come to terms with such an obvious and clearly overwhelming force in life?

The story in the Gospel According to John is a story about Jesus' confrontation with Lazarus' death. It is a wonderfully complex drama with multiple layers of meaning, too complex to flush out in 10 or 15 minutes. While there are several important interactions between Jesus and the people in this story, I'll focus on one: Jesus' interaction with Martha.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she left her sister Mary at home to mourn with their friends to meet him as he walked toward their home. On the dusty road in the Kidron valley she met him and--perhaps in anger--said to him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her: "Your brother will rise again."

It was one of those responses that suggests that the pain of death be ignored because, after all, there's life after death. "Yes, I know all that." Martha says. "He'll rise again on the last day along with everyone else." She was repeating the words of the creed, but it wasn't very helpful to her. Someone she loved died. For Jesus to say to her, "Buck up, Martha! Why weep? It'll work out in the end" was not what she wanted to hear. Nor was it helpful to her in her grieving. She knew the affirmation of faith in the resurrection, but it didn't help in this situation. The grieving was too close.

This congregation is involved with the Open Door Ministries in Midland. This ministry works with people who are homeless. We have teams of people who serve meals there on the last Saturday of the month. If you'd like to join one of those teams you can make a note of it on the communication card. Many of the folks who come to Open Door come with deep personal issues that lead to homelessness: an addiction of some kind, mental illness, experiences of abuse, broken relationships, poor choices. A common theme in the work that is done with people there is a sense of personal failure. "I feel like a failure" is a phrase that is something most have in common when they find themselves there.

This last week I received an email from the Open Door. And in that email was a scanned copy of an individual's goal sheet for the week. And with each person from whom the emailer heard this phrase—"I feel like a failure"--through "tears muffling words of hope and reason", she wrote across the top of their weekly goal plan: "Brokenness does not equal failure".

"Brokenness does not equal failure."

Just because a person feels broken whether by grief or other life draining experience or choice doesn't mean there is no hope, that a person is lost, beyond hope. The way to eclipse this lie that being broken means a person is a failure is to look to the cross and recognize that the pain experienced there on Jesus' part was a path to new life, to resurrection. Death didn't have the last word. And if you doubt that, I wonder if you can explain to me why we are sitting in this sacred space 20 centuries later worshipping the One who said to Martha, the broken one:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Those in the small group study who have read the chapter for this week know that the Greek word for *believe*—*pisteuo*--also means *trust*. There is a difference between the two words.

There's an old story about a man who was challenged to cross Niagara Falls on a tight rope. He was an unusual acrobat in that his balancing instrument was a wheelbarrow rather than the usual 20-foot pole. The thick cable was stretched taut from the American side to the Canadian side, the mist rising as he stepped onto the wire. As he prepares himself, a crowd gathers, and from the awaiting crowd a man shouts,

“Go for it! I believe you can do it!”

The man ignores the voice.

“Go ahead! You can do it! I believe in you!”

This time the wire walker turns to the man and asks, “Do you really believe I can do this?”

“Yes, I do!”

“Then come up here and get in the wheelbarrow.”

There's a vast difference between trust and belief. Listen again to Jesus' words to Martha:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who trust in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and trusts in me will never die. Do you trust this?”

Do you hear the difference?

Last Sunday I went to a concert with my wife and the Girlfriend's class and others from the church at the Dow Event Center in Saginaw. Toby Mac, they said. Now I discovered how very dumb I am about the contemporary Christian music scene and the country music scene because I thought Toby Mac was a country music guy. So I'm thinking cowboy hat, twangy voices, steel guitars, a guy losing his truck, dog and wife in the same week kind of lyrics maybe with a Christian twist because I knew it was a Christian concert. However, I was traumatized along with Betty Stark. When the bass beat made everyone's bodies vibrate in the stands it became clear that this was not a country show. It was room-shaking, ear drum busting, hip hop! Never been to a concert before where my body vibrated with the music. Wow! I could hardly understand any of the lyrics but people were into it. That was clear. What also became clear to me, however, was that there was a message of life in these songs and in those who performed them and those who served as their crew.

One young man made a particular impression. He was a member of the crew. Came out on the stage between sets. He talked about the fact that there are some Christians who somehow convey the idea that Jesus is mad at you with their guilt ridden messages and their judgments of other people. He said what happens is that they judge you away from Jesus. But the truth is that Jesus isn't mad at you. Jesus is madly in love with you. Then he told the story of a man who had children with three different women, was sort of a lost soul, didn't know who he was. The guy was just drifting through life, thought about taking his own life. He was living in brokenness. That man was him, and somehow—I don't remember how—he became connected

with Toby Mac who received him as he was in all his brokenness and loved him. Over and over again he accepted him even when he screwed up. The way he put it moved me: he said that Toby Mac loved him toward Jesus. He didn't judge him away from Jesus as he had experienced with some church people. Whoa! There are some people he repeated who judge you away from Jesus, but that's not Jesus' way. There are others who love you toward Jesus. And for this man on the stage, it transformed his life. He was in effect given a new life and you could hear it in his voice: the gratitude, the joy, the passion.

There is a vast difference between saying *I believe* in Jesus and *I trust* him. Jesus was asking Martha if she trusted him. "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you trust this?" Anyone can say they believe, but actually trusting him is quite something else. Trusting him means a willingness to get in his wheelbarrow.

As I said earlier, at the end of the story Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. God has the power of resuscitation. God has power over life and death which is what we celebrate today, and in miraculous fashion—through his own tears--Jesus brings his friend back to life. This is a story of resuscitation.

It is not resurrection. Resurrection is not about giving breath back to these fragile bodies of ours. Lazarus would die again. In fact, the poor man has a mark on his back as soon as he comes out of the grave. John's Gospel later indicates that Jesus' opponents were out to kill him, too, because people were trusting Jesus as a result of raising Lazarus. Resuscitation is not resurrection. Resurrection is something more. Resurrection has to do with trusting God to do more than what we see as possible. Resurrection is about a whole new life, a life transformed. It's not about returning things to the way they were as resuscitation implies. It's about God giving life in a way thought to be impossible, like going to a tomb while it was still dark as John's Gospel describes Mary on the first Easter morning. She was expecting the usual when it came to death: a body in the tomb. What she discovered was quite something else: God acting in a way she thought completely impossible. God overcoming the brokenness of death and creating a whole new reality of life beyond death, life beyond brokenness.

Notice that when Jesus tells Martha "I am the resurrection and the life" it is in the present tense. He doesn't say "I have been". God is no "has been".

Maybe for some of you God is a "has been", meaning you may have felt let down by God in the past. Maybe the brokenness you've experienced in your life is still fresh, the disappointment is still alive in you, and while you once gave God a shot and still acknowledge the existence of God, trusting God just isn't in you at this point in your life. Been there. Done that.

Jesus also doesn't say "I will be the resurrection and the life." Sometimes people have the mistaken idea that in order to experience the gift of Christ's presence, you have to have your act together, get things right, before God will enter our lives to give direction or offer care or provide satisfaction and power. Maybe it's the result of someone judging you away from Jesus rather than loving you toward Jesus. Maybe it's something else.

Wherever we find ourselves in relationship to God this morning, there is a message here for all of us. Jesus' Word in John's Gospel is "I am", not I have been or I will be, not I was or one day I will become. But "I am". Now, not just yesterday or tomorrow. Now! This moment is the best one for opening ourselves to being loved toward Jesus. Over and over and over again loved toward Jesus. There we will find resurrection. There we will know the God of

possibilities who wants us to receive life now and beyond this life.

The question for us has nothing to do with judgment and is the same question Jesus had for Martha: “Do you trust this?”