

"An Early Easter"

Psalm 130; John 11:1-45

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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My friend and colleague, Rabbi Jim Prosnit, says that when Jews speak of the timing of the festival of Passover, they always say it is "late" or "early" but never "on time." We Christians speak of Easter the same way, don't we? It is always "early" or "late," but never "on time."

Easter this year feels early, in large part due to the weather. If it were really early, it would be today! March 22nd is the earliest it can be, April 25th the latest, so if it was three days later this year it would be exactly in the middle between "earliest" and "latest." As it is, it is two weeks from today, and that feels early enough to me and, I suspect, to Minister of Music Chris Shay and all who prepare for Easter worship. Next year, you ask? Easter is on March 28th! Brrr!

So this message, "An Early Easter," may be a bit off by this year's Easter calendar and by the less-than-spring-like weather. Yet the story of the raising of Lazarus is an early Easter, a promise of what is to come. Despite winter's grip; despite the hearts of Mary and Martha, frozen with grief; despite the icy shudder that chills our souls when the threat of death surrounds us; despite all that, the resurrection promise appears in today's story. Jesus tells them, and us: *"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."* Rebirth is coming. Hope is coming. Easter is coming.

This story is not only a reminder to **hear** that promise but to **embrace** it. Facing death; facing the loss of hope and of hope in the future; the story invites us to embrace an encounter with the presence of the Lord.

Before talking about this story from John 11, I'd like to look briefly at Psalm 130. This psalm has such a rich liturgical history that it has its own name, *"De Profundis,"* Latin for the first phrase of the psalm, "Out of the Depths." So evocative are its verses

describing our struggle with holding on to faith in God in times of despair that it has been set to many tunes for public worship, including Hymn #515 in our Hymnal by the reformer Martin Luther. It is also, interestingly, one of the “Songs of Ascent” or “Pilgrim Songs.” Religious pilgrims expressing their deep longing for an encounter with the divine as they made their way to the Temple in Jerusalem sang these songs, Psalms 120 – 134.

Yet despite being used for public worship the psalm is intensely personal: *“Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice.”* Of interest to Methodists, this was the psalm sung at St. Paul’s Cathedral the afternoon of Wednesday, May 24th, 1738. Worshipping in the cathedral that day was the Rev. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement. The psalm so spoke to him and his spiritual struggle to accept the grace of God that he mentioned it in his journal, writing, *“I felt they were singing to me.”* It came immediately before his conversion that same evening, which he describes in his journal while listening to Martin Luther’s preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. Wesley wrote, *“...while he [Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away **my** sins, even **mine**, and saved **me** from the law of sin and death.”* (emphasis Wesley’s).

Yet however great Wesley’s struggle with faith, it pales in comparison to the grief of the two sisters. Lazarus, their brother, has died, and when they finally encounter Jesus these two sisters separately lament, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”* Their unity in grief is intriguing given what little we know of them from the scriptures. Some will recall the episode in Luke’s Gospel (**Luke 10:38-42**) where Mary annoys Martha because Mary studies with Jesus rather than helping Martha with the hospitality chores: a story for another day.

But in this story the two sisters, so different, react the same way, *“Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.”* According to the Gospel, Jesus delayed his departure two days after

word reaches him about Lazarus' critical illness; and his theological comment that Lazarus' illness is "*for the glory of God*" appears to give Jesus an "F" in pastoral care. This is one of the challenges to how we understand this story. To be sure, Jesus revealing the glory of God is an important theme in John's Gospel: a theme we will return to in a moment. But a careless or literal reading of Jesus' delay certainly presents him as indifferent if not uncaring. I am confident that if any of you called me in a moment of family crisis and I waited two days to come and told your friends "*this illness is for the glory of God*" that you'd have some choice words for me.

It is not my intent to be irreverent. But I will say that I have stood over too many caskets, in too many funeral homes and at too many cemeteries; and at too many hospital bedsides to have any sentimental notions about the virtue of suffering. If we take this story as a literal narrative of Jesus' pastoral response to a grieving family, it leaves us, at best, confused and angry and him detached.

So how are we to understand this story? If you've ever gotten mired in a novel and decided, "*Hey, I'm going to read the last chapter and see how this turns out,*" you'll understand why I suggest that the first way to understand this story is to understand John's purpose in writing it. He states it clearly at the end of his Gospel:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31)

Jesus' response to Lazarus' death points John's readers – then over 100 years after Jesus was resurrected, and us, now, over 2,000 years later – to belief in Jesus as the Messiah. The certainty of Lazarus' death; Mary and Martha's grief; the presence of witnesses; the disbelief of some (verse 37); all set the stage "*that the glory of God might be revealed:*" the miraculous reversal that demonstrates Jesus' power as Messiah by raising Lazarus from the dead. So we first understand this story as John's call to believe in Jesus as Messiah.

Second, we understand the story by knowing it as “an early Easter.” It is a preview of what will happen to Jesus. Like Jesus, left on Calvary to suffer, seemingly without hope, Lazarus’ sisters and friends in Bethany suffer, seemingly without hope. Like Jesus, placed in the tomb and remaining there, Lazarus is in the tomb. Like Jesus, the stone from Lazarus’ tomb is rolled away. Like Jesus, it is a power beyond the tomb that raises Lazarus: God’s power!

This is why this Christ, the one of “*the resurrection and the life*,” stands in the midst of Mary and Martha’s pain. He stands before the gates of death with tears in his eyes and compassion in his heart. He knows that it takes great faith to believe in the glory of God in times of suffering; and at some point he knows he will have to live that example for us on the cross.

Christians who are required to memorize a Bible verse, and allowed to choose which one, know the shortest verse in the Bible: “*Jesus wept.*” (John 11:35) We might want to recall this easy answer when answers aren’t easy. Jesus weeps with those who grieve and yet proclaims that death is not the final victor! Even when it seems death has won and it is too late for anything to be done, Jesus stands among the stench and declares: “*I am the Resurrection and the Life:*” not wishful thinking, but an early Easter and the glory of God!

Finally, we understand this story by knowing it is a story about us—about you and me—and our ability to connect John’s witness with the person of Jesus. I wish I could say all will be well, that we will never suffer, that we will never die. But conscience forbids that I be party to a lie of such monstrous proportions. A lay leader in a former church said it succinctly: “*None of us gets out alive.*”

It reminds me of a version of a story I’ve told before. A pastor stops in at a travel agent’s office to find the agent frantically answering phone calls and getting materials e-mailed and sent to clients. When things settled down the agent said, “*Sorry to make you wait, Reverend. Everyone knows they’re going on a trip but they all wait until the last minute to make travel plans.*” The pastor sighed and said, “*Yes, it’s the same in my business.*”

So do we believe in him who promises victory over death? Can we, as with Martha in the story, respond, *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*? Believing does not mean we will not grieve, only that neither grief nor death has the last word.

For us on this side of Easter, we know how the story ends. But it's not just that. We see resurrection breaking into the world:

When nations choose peace over war,
There is the resurrection and the life.

When we respond to the crises of others
with acts of care and concern,
There is the resurrection and the life.

When people offer help without expecting anything in return,
There is the resurrection and the life.

When leaders build trust instead of fear,
There is the resurrection and the life.

When we reach to those who others may have forgotten,
There is the resurrection and the life.

When we take up the cross no one has a right to ask us to take
up, because Jesus took up his cross for us,
There is the resurrection and the life.

When this church has found renewed vision and renewed life: -
-moving from wariness to worthy worship
-moving from maintenance to mission
-moving from survival to service,
There is the resurrection and the life.

When we believe in him who **is** “the resurrection and the life,” we discover new, meaningful, abundant life in Christ, and **live** the early Easter because Christ stands among us with the promise of victory. Thanks be to God!