

“Yes, Lord, I Believe”

John 11: 1 – 28

Makemie Presbyterian Church

November 1, 2009

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”

⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, “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.”

⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”

⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”

⁹Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”

¹¹After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”

¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.”

¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming; she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."

This ends the reading.

It is NOT Christmas yet, but it won't be long now. The only problem is that we have to walk through a graveyard to get there. So will hang on to each other as we slip past the tombs, telling every resurrection story we can think of.

Maybe that is why the lectionary gives us John's story about Lazarus on All Saints' Day. It is a kind of rehearsal for what lies ahead; in which Jesus does for his friend what God will do for him. It is his & our assurance that there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death, which is able to call us out of our stinking fears into the fullness & sweet mystery of life.

Bethany was a dangerous place for Jesus to be in those days. Just two miles from Jerusalem, it was in easy reach of the people who had tried to stone him just days before. Jesus had escaped them & was safely across the river Jordan when word reached him that his old friend Lazarus was ill. Delaying his return, he arrived too late. Lazarus had been dead three days & Jesus had missed the funeral.

"Come & see," someone said, with all the formal tact of a funeral director, "come & see the body so it will be real for you, so

you can accept what has happened." But it was already very real for Jesus & he did not accept it at all.

"Lazarus, come out," he cried in a loud voice & Lazarus did, trailing his bandages behind him like a scarf he no longer needed. "Unbind him," Jesus said, "and let him go."

Flannery O'Connor has a gruesome short story entitled, "A Good Man is Hard to Find." In it, a family that is out for a drive crosses the path of an escaped convict known as "The Misfit." One by one he has his two sons take each member of the family out into the woods & shoot them - first the father & son, then the little girl, the mother & the baby. Finally only the grandmother is left.

The grandmother puts forth every argument she can think of to save her life. She first calls upon his sense of chivalry: "You wouldn't shoot an old lady, would you?"

"I would hate to have to," he replies.

She then appeals to what she thinks must be The Misfit's better nature: "I just know you're a good man," she tells him.

“Nome,” he says, “I ain’t a good man.”

Grasping at straws she encourages him to pray to Jesus for help:

“I don’t want no help,” he says. “I’m doing all right by myself.”

In the end, all her attempts to dissuade him fail & the Misfit kills her too. But somehow, the grandmother knew all along that her efforts would fail because of something he had said to her earlier. He had told her that he believed in a world “where the lame don’t walk, the blind don’t see & what’s dead stays dead.”

Flannery O'Connor has a way of telling stories that stick in your mind. The Misfit was an unlikable character & certainly not a good man. And O'Connor reveals so much about him & his worldview with that one phrase -- he believed in a world "where the lame don't walk, the blind don't see & what's dead stays dead."

I couldn’t help but be reminded of that story when I read our text for today because Lazarus doesn’t stay dead. Later the Apostle Paul will confront the people in the church at Corinth who had the same worldview as the Misfit. Paul asks, "How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?"

And now, this strikes me as a very modern problem. There seem to be lots of people today who believe in a world "where the lame don't walk, the blind don't see & what's dead stays dead." Ours is not a world accustomed to miracles. Death seems to be a pretty permanent state of affairs. In a world like ours, it isn't easy to believe that the lame can walk, the blind can see & the dead can live.

If we have any confidence in the words of Jesus, we have to be struck with his claims that his followers would not die. When speaking to the Sadducees who did not believe in the Resurrection, he said, "God is not the God of the dead but of the living." Jesus makes clear that those who love & are loved by God are not allowed to cease to exist, because they are God's treasures. God delights in them & intends to hold onto them.

In our text this morning that Ted just read, just as Jesus is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives & believes in me will never die."

The power of God is now & has always been the power to raise us from the dead. Period. It is not about us. It is about God."

If we really believe what Jesus & Paul say, then our whole perspective will change. When Tim Robbins' character in *The Shawshank Redemption* is thrown into the cooler for two weeks after raising the issue of a new trial, he says: "I guess it comes down to this: Get busy dying, or get busy living." That's a great way of putting the issue before us too. In light of Christ's resurrection & ours, are we busy dying or busy living?

The story told by Flannery O'Connor is one way of talking about the resurrection. But let's go at this promise of eternal life in another direction. It is a story that plays itself out in my head from time to time. I still circle this story when I think of the promise of our Savior. When Jaxon was a toddler, one of his caregivers was Nadine Hostettler. I was thrilled with the care that Nadine gave him. She was a Mennonite, she also did foster care & had adopted one little girl, Nancy & was in the process of adopting another, Jenna. There was no TV in her home but a rocking computer that the children barely old enough to sit still would use to type & play games. We became pretty close to one another, sharing thoughts & ideas. In my own hesitant way I became very fond of Nadine & Jaxon adored her.

Then Nadine lost 20 pounds in a few weeks. In a turnabout I kept the kids while she & her sister Christy went to John Hopkins to find out what was causing the weight loss & fatigue. Nadine was diagnosed with lymphoma.

As she began treatment, the hospital staff would joke about the number of visitors she had. Nadine would laugh & say, "And they are all my brothers & sisters."

Once when she was up in Baltimore for a course of treatment, I got to keep Nancy who was 8 & Jenna 5. After everyone was asleep I was downstairs, writing on the computer, when in drifted Nancy.

"Hey," I said, "you having trouble sleeping in a strange house?"

She came over & snuggled into me. "umm."

Patting her back & stroking her hair, I asked, "Do you want anything?"

I was thinking, you know, hot chocolate, a piece of fruit.

She said, "Yes."

"What?"

Nancy burst into tears, "I'm afraid my mom is going to die."

"Oh, Baby," I said, "I'm afraid of that, too."

It was late in the fall of the year when Nadine was diagnosed, and by mid March she was gone. As she fought the good fight one of the nurses asked her,

“What about all this?”

Nadine said, “For me this is a win-win situation. If I get better I get to raise my girls, if I die I get to meet my Savior.”

I think about this a lot. I am a Christian minister, a certified degree holding master of the divine & Nadine’s statement makes me angry. It makes me cry.

Yes, of course I believe Jesus is the resurrection. I believe it, I do. But & it is a big but, the missing. I don’t think it is in me to make a statement like that. Maybe I’m the only one who struggles with this; A belief in this most important promise but when push comes to shove I don’t see it as win, win.

So, I’m working on it. Every time we gather I try to become bolder, saying it as part of our benediction; “be bold in the Spirit.” But this All Saints Sunday I see where those who have gone to glory used to sit, but no longer. (As I read these names, I’m sure each of you will have your own lists, of those you remember; like Richard Boyd, the friend of the Merrills who recently passed away.)

I remember each person whose funeral I conducted.

Buddy Jones, Dolly Colbourn, Dick Sherkey, Janet Wilson Royals, Ruth Bounds, Iva Timmons, Shirley Adkins, Helen Cabler, Toots Hancock, Minnie Blank, Ruth Taylor, Peggy Timmons, Dora Hudson, Eileen Blevins, Ethel Witt, Ellen Pusey, Monica Young, Richard Eisinger, Eldred Bounds, Perry Waters, Fran Jones, Mabel Cohen, Phoeby Trader, Virginia Hall, Wanda Adkins, Bill Pusey, Sr., Eloise Speiran, Skeet Ramsey, Lillian Tilghman, Iris Duncan Heysinger, Brian Pusey, Theo Hauck, Trey Lynch, and Anne Kinstler. All remembered in the church, today; on All Saints' Sunday.

Like Martha I believe Jesus is the resurrection. I do. But the missing, well it's what we need each other for isn't it? To help with the sorrow, to strengthen our faith, so we might pray for one another, in order to live to our fullest, blessed by the one who is coming.

In Anne Lamott's novel *Crooked Little Heart*, Elizabeth is a main character trying to rebuild her life after the accidental death of her first husband Andrew. She's remarried & raising her teenage daughter, Rosie. But she's never completed her grieving over Andrew's death & hasn't fully invested in her new marriage to James -- nor re-invested in life itself.

Near the end of the book, she begins to come to life, to say her good-byes to the past so she can live in the present. Her best girlfriend is a woman named Rae, a new convert to Christ, & Rae gives Elizabeth some advice: "Just keep trying to do what the Good Book says, & practice resurrection."

According to the Bible, we do live in a world where the lame walk, the blind see & what's dead just may live again. In a world like that we all need to practice resurrection.

Jesus asked Martha, Do you believe I am the resurrection & the life? And she said Yes, I do. Martha the busy one, the one waiting to confront Jesus, "Where were you?" she yells. Martha, a Jew, a sister, leaps across all she has known to say,

"Yes, Lord, I believe you are the resurrection & the life."

As scary as yesterday can be, there is this promise, sure & certain, Jesus gives us many things, a sweetness, a strength, trouble as disciples, but always the promise of our lives, "I am the resurrection & the life." He talks to Martha, grieving over the loss of her brother, Lazarus, now unbound & alive. She who in the next

chapter is too busy to talk to Jesus, she believes his promise, “Yes, she says, “I do.”

What say you?