

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 9, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

“THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE”

John 11:1-54; sermon text v. 25

Over these past few weeks in Lent, we’ve been reading and speaking about some of Jesus’ most significant encounters in John’s Gospel - his encounter with Nicodemus, with the Samaritan woman at the well, with the man born blind. Today we read from John 11 of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. But shouldn’t we wait until Easter for this story? After all, this is the story in which Jesus says these words about himself, “I am the resurrection and the life, they who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” (11:25) It seems to be the wrong time for a resurrection story. But actually this is exactly when we need to hear it. For the story is not just about the raising of Lazarus; its also about the death of Jesus. The story tells us why he was put to death and reminds us why he died. By his own death and resurrection Jesus has become for us the resurrection and the life.

Now Jesus’ raising of Lazarus begins with a rather strange detail. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, he didn’t rush to Lazarus’ bedside in Bethany to perform a healing miracle. No, he delayed for two days, and when he arrived Lazarus was already dead and buried. So the delay gave Jesus the opportunity to do a spectacular work. But the real reason Jesus delayed was because he knew that doing any work in Bethany would put him in danger. So before going there, Jesus had to be absolutely sure that the hour of his own death had come. Even the disciples knew that going there would put Jesus in danger. Thomas said to the others, “Let’s go down to Bethany with Jesus, so that we may die with him.”

When Jesus finally arrived, Lazarus had been dead and buried four days. His soul had now been irretrievably separated from his body. Even Jesus couldn’t do anything now. Mary and Martha gently rebuked Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here our brother would not have died.” But Jesus said to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me, though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” In other words, “Martha, I’m going to do something, and not just on the last day in the general resurrection. I’m going to do something now.” So Jesus came to the tomb where Lazarus lay. Jesus wept along with the other mourners. Then he ordered the stone removed. He lifted up his heart to the Father, and cried out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” The dead man staggered out in burial cloths and bandages. Jesus said, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Now Jesus' suspicions were well-founded. When the Pharisees heard what had happened, they met with the chief priests and asked, "What will we do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy our temple and our nation." But Caiaphas, the high priest said, "Get with it; don't you know that it is expedient for you that one man should die rather than have the whole nation perish." In other words, "Remember that we have a deal with the Romans. If we keep our people under control, they will leave us alone. The temple will stand, and the nation will survive. So let's get rid of him. It makes sense. It's for the best. It is expedient." So the plot against Jesus was hatched in earnest.

But why did the raising of Lazarus lead to the plot against Jesus' life? After all, Jesus had already raised up the son of the widow of Nain and the daughter of Jairus. Why didn't these mighty acts provoke similar plots? Well, it had to do with location. These works had taken place in small villages up in Galilee. To the urban Jews of Judea, the Galilean Jews were country cousins. Nothing that happened up there mattered. But the raising of Lazarus took place in the large Judean town of Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. As long as Jesus was working in Galilee, he could be ignored, but once his influence reached a place like Bethany, the authorities became very concerned, concerned enough to seek his death.

But who killed Jesus? This has been a much debated question. Well, certainly the Jewish religious leaders started the plot against Jesus. And they kept pushing it until they got their way, even buying off a crowd in Pilate's court to shout for his death. But that doesn't mean that all the Jewish people were responsible. In fact, Jesus had many supporters among the Jewish people. It is wrong to blame all Jews for Jesus' death, as some Christians have done. Martin Luther, the 16th century church reformer did much work on behalf of the church and the Gospel. But his writings are marred because of his misdirected hatred towards the Jews. Anti-Semitism is wrong, and unworthy of Christians. For our brother and Saviour Jesus Christ lived as a Jew and died a Jew. And that alone should be enough to keep us from anti-Semitism.

What about the Romans, the Gentiles? Well some of the Romans had a hand in killing Jesus. Other than Jesus, Pilate is the only historical figure mentioned in the Apostles' Creed. "Crucified under Pontius Pilate." Pilate, who could have kept Jesus from being crucified, gave in to the noisy demands of a small crowd. Like Caiaphas, he too wanted to keep the peace and protect his position. The Roman soldiers carried out the order and nailed an innocent man to a Cross. So the Romans too, or at least some of them, bore responsibility for killing Jesus. Some of them really didn't know what they were doing. But that doesn't let them off the hook.

What about God? What role did God have in the death of his Son? I heard someone say that

God killed Jesus. I don't agree with that. I do think God allowed it to happen. Now some people say, "Well, we can't blame anyone. It had to happen, it was prophesied." But I say the death of Jesus would have happened even if it hadn't been prophesied. I think the prophecies were there in order to help the early church and later generations to understand the significance of Jesus' death. The death of Jesus, prophesied or not, was inevitable. His light shone up the darkened corners of the world and of people's lives. His love lit up our lack of love. His overturning of the tables in the temple signified his desire to overthrow a corrupt and ingrown religious system and open the way for people to have direct access to God. And that way was through Himself. "Come to the Father through me," he said, no longer through the sacrifice of bulls and goats and lambs. The authorities rightly perceived that if Jesus was the way, that meant no more temple, no more animal sacrifices, no more religious apparatus, no more priesthood, no more control. So this man could not be allowed to live. Jesus' death was expedient. It made sense. It was for the good of all. It protected the nation, the temple, the status quo.

But do you begin to see now who killed Jesus? It was all of us. For what was in Caiaphas and Pilate and the crowd and the fair-weather followers and the timid disciples and Judas and the religious leaders, all this is in you and me. Make no mistake. You and I would not have acted any differently than they did. I have done the easy thing, the thing that made most sense, but perhaps not the right thing. I have acted expediently, for my own interest, even if it harmed others. I have schemed and spun the truth even lied to protect myself. And I bet you've acted expediently, too. The same sins that killed Jesus are in you and in me. The correct answer is that all humanity killed Jesus. The truth he told and the light he shone was just too much for sinned to bear. It was true then and it would be true now. "It is expedient," said Caiaphas, "that one man should die for the nation and that the whole nation should not perish."

But Caiaphas' word was not the last word. In fact, he didn't even realize the full depth of the words he spoke. As John says, "He did not say this of his own accord, but being the high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." And so it happened. Jesus himself was crucified, and buried in a tomb behind a big stone, just as his friend Lazarus had been. But Jesus not only died by our sins, he died for our sins, the innocent taking the place of the guilty. And on Easter Sunday morning the Father raised him in a mighty display of power, confounding human schemes and overturning the power of sin and evil and death. Lazarus was raised from death for a time, but he would die again. Jesus was raised to live forevermore. By his own death and resurrection Jesus Christ has become for us the resurrection and the life. He died and rose again so that through faith in Him we might be forgiven and made heirs of eternal life, so that we who were scattered might be brought into God's family now and forever.

Now Jesus' resurrection work today mostly takes place beyond our sight as he brings the souls of the redeemed to the Father's house at the day of death. But his resurrection power will be seen in its fullness on the last day, when all the tombs (including Lazarus's second tomb) are opened, souls are joined with resurrection bodies, the redeemed of the Lord go unto eternal life, and the those who have rejected Christ go to the place of eternal separation.

But Jesus' resurrection power is not just for the day of our death or the last day of history. It is for now, too. In each of us there is a part that has grown dead and cold, and needs to be raised to new life again. Perhaps it's true for the church itself.

William Mackay was a Scottish doctor who as a young man, rejected Christian faith. Once he treated a poor man who was dying. In spite of his painful disease, the man found peace in reading his Bible. After the man died, Dr. Mackay opened his Bible. Imagine his surprise when he read his own name on the inside cover! It was the Bible Mackay's mother had given him when he was a boy. He had sold it years before and somehow it had come to this man, and now back to him. Dr. Mackay came back to Christ the day he recovered his Bible. Later he wrote a great hymn called, "Revive Us Again."

And so it can happen, because Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life, not just for a future day, but for today. Now we can't control where or when Jesus will come. Sometimes he seems to delay. But he hasn't forgotten us. He loves us. He is our friend, and what a friend he is. If we trust him and call on His Name, he will come to us in due course, just as he came to Bethany. There are no plots here to get rid of Jesus. So the Risen One will come and work in us and among us, reviving our spirits and raising our church to new levels of joy and commitment and faith. Perhaps it's starting today. By his own death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has become for us the resurrection and the life. So we say, "Come, Lord Jesus, and do your mighty work in our midst."

