

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 11:18-44

"Life After Death"

Today I want to talk to you about something that for some folks is very uncomfortable. The subject is death. While it is true that when we are born we know that there is one thing that will happen in our lives – and that is that one day we are going to die. That is a certainty, unless Jesus comes again – we will die. Along with this subject come a lot of emotions and a lot of questions.

I can tell you quite honestly that in my I struggled with the loss of loved ones until Jesus had me meet my fears in a most extraordinary way. In 2003, while in seminary I was blessed to work as a chaplain at the Pittsburgh VA Hospital for my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). Believe it or not, I was assigned to the place that I did not want to be. It would be OK if I was in the Emergency Room or I was up in the Surgical Wing, or any of the other things. But where did I end up? Hospice and Palliative Care. For eight weeks I would be working with people who were preparing to 'go home.' The experiences that I was blessed to be a part of were life changing for me and for the people that I would go on in ministry to serve as they were going home – as well as their loved ones. It is quite a privilege to be present with someone as they are going to meet the Lord and an even greater privilege to be with their loved ones to be able to share with them the blessing of what they had just witnessed. What I was once afraid of, I found, by the grace of God, to be a part of Jesus' plan for each of us, that as our friends and loved ones take their last breaths on earth, as believers, we know that they are walking into the arms of Jesus and beginning the rest of their lives – born again with Him.

Today's Holy Gospel from John chapter 11 deals with death in a way that is filled with promise. Here we have Martha and Mary – right? Mary is back at the house doing what Jewish people do when they have lost someone – it is called sitting Shiva, where people come and bring fruit baskets and have comfort food with their friends or loved ones. That is what was going on at this time. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming – she went out to meet Him, and Mary stayed home with the guests – sitting Shiva.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." (John 11:21-27) We are celebrating the fact that Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, who came into the world by such a miraculous way – in a manger – and forever changed history, simply by being here, as Emmanuel, which means 'God with us' is among His people. And Jesus Christ is the embodiment – the true reflection of God, and all of the good that God has for us. One of the good things that He has for us is this passage, the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John. We find Jesus on His way to perform one of His most famous miracles – the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

What I feel is very important about this episode in Jesus' life is that there are two things that we can learn about the character of our Savior, about Jesus. The first is:

- That Jesus lovingly allows us grief. When Martha came to Jesus she said that if only He had been there while Lazarus was sick, her brother would not have died. And what was Jesus' response? Jesus said "Your brother will rise again." He didn't say 'oh, your grief is misplaced' and He most certainly didn't say 'look it is time to move on' or He didn't say 'you'll get over it' and here is the big one: 'time heals all wounds.' Jesus also didn't say – 'well you know – real men don't cry!' Jesus was not one to use clichés – even those from 2,000 years ago.
- Instead Jesus always spoke directly to the heart. As a matter of fact later in this very same chapter, in verse 35 – and you heard me pause distinctly before I read the shortest verse in the Bible – "*Jesus wept.*" Why did Jesus weep? There are some that say 'He was saddened because His friend died.' No – I don't think so. Jesus knew exactly what He was going to do – in just moments. Jesus weeps for those people in their grief.

Both Martha and later Mary blamed Jesus for not preventing Lazarus' death. Anger is most certainly one way to deal with the loss of a loved one. If you have ever experienced that you know what I mean. Jesus understood their grief and He felt for them. Holy Scripture tells us that Jesus loved Lazarus, just like He loved Martha and Mary. It also says in Isaiah that the Savior would be a man of sorrows – acquainted with grief. Jesus felt their pain and He experienced it right along with them. Jesus allowed their grief – just as He allows yours and mine. He did more than just give them permission to grieve – Jesus offered them something that no one else – or nothing else can offer. Jesus offered – hope.

Jesus said that Lazarus would rise again, and that Jesus, Himself would be the means of that resurrection. Martha thought Jesus was speaking about the final resurrection, and you know - she was partly right. She must have had a mindset like the Pharisees. You see the Pharisees believed in eternal life, but the Sadducees do not – and that is so "sad-you-see." She didn't understand that Jesus was just about to display the fact that He has the power over death in just moments.

But I would like you to listen again to these words of Jesus - "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*" I don't know about you but whenever I hear Jesus say "I Am" my mind goes right back to the Book of Exodus when Moses asks who shall I say is sending me? "God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' "(Exodus 3:14) Seven times in the Gospel of John Jesus reveals His identity and this is one of them: "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*"

I want to share with you something personal that happened to me a few years ago, when a person I had grown very close to was dying of cancer. I worked alongside him every day. He was our church sexton. He was also a fabulous artist and musician as well. I saw cancer steal his joy, and finally his mobility and his ability to speak. I received a phone call about 4 AM

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from Buffalo Hospice that it would not be long before he passed, and so I drove there. I was able to visit with him, his friends and family. As the Lord was telling me that it was time, and you would be surprised how God tells ministers when it is time to give what we call ‘the last rites’ – the Litany for the Dying. Some of you have there when I have been blessed to do this. Well, as I began to lead the prayers for the Litany for the Dying – He was looking right in my eyes and I knew that he heard every word I said. Suddenly his gaze moved over my right shoulder. He stopped looking at me and kept looking over my right shoulder, and his face changed from a pained expression to a look of incredible joy. I am not doing it justice in describing his face – it was indescribable. As I was anointing him – I knew that he had just taken his last breath. When I finished the prayers, the nurse who was to my left, spoke to me and called the time of his death. When I looked across the bed to the two ladies who were very dear to him, standing there and had been praying with me – I told them that our dear friend had gone to be with Jesus. They had just witnessed the peaceful transition from this world to eternity. I asked them to come around to the side that I was standing so that they could look at his face. That alone told them that they knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was in heaven with Jesus. It was life changing for them!

Just a few minutes later, after Jesus proclaimed His identity and the promise of resurrection through Him, Jesus would demonstrate that very fact in the life of Lazarus, but He wasn’t just talking about bringing Lazarus back from the dead, as wonderful as that was going to be. Jesus was saying that He is the door to life, both a full and abundant life on earth and when we leave this earth, an even more wonderful and abundant life in heaven. And when we place our faith in Jesus Christ and what He did on the cross at Calvary, then we have the hope He offers to all who will take it.

You see, that hope is available to everyone, through knowing and submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. How many times have you heard “*For God so loved the world*” – that means everybody! God doesn’t pick out a people group and say “I don’t love you!” He doesn’t do that – He loves EVERYONE; but NOT everyone loves Him! Some people outwardly reject the invitation. No one but Jesus knew what was going to happen that day, when Jesus came to Bethany. And that set the stage for what Jesus did next; Jesus called out in a loud voice “*Lazarus come out!*” The one who spoke everything into existence had just restored existence to Lazarus. Did you know that this event took place one week before Jesus would take His last breath on the cross? Three days later He would rise again. I believe this event was to prepare believers for what would take place shortly after His crucifixion – that Jesus was going to walk out of His grave – NEVERN to die again. Lazarus, most certainly would die again, just as anyone who has had a near death experience will die again. Jesus Christ lives! We will celebrate that two weeks from today on Easter Sunday. The next week Jesus told His disciples on the night before He died – the night He was arrested – just hours before He was taken into captivity – that His love for His followers is so great that He planned to be with them for all eternity. He told them, and He tells us now “*In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.*” (John 14:2-3)

My friends, Jesus feels our grief and stands right alongside us when we hurt. Hope is not found in the good life we try to live. Jesus says that our hope for eternity lies not within us or anything we want or that we do, but in Him alone – and what He has done. That is what He means when He says that **He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.**

I want to repeat what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: “*For the wages of sin is death, (in other words what we earn in this life is death) but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 6:23) The **free gift of God** is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. We need to put our trust in Him, and that offer is filled with grace, peace, love and a great deal of comfort.

This is NOT a sermon about death – this is a sermon about life – life after death. We have a promise of eternal life - which Jesus won for us on the cross – and death loses! The Apostle Paul so brilliantly put it this way in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15 “*O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore my brothers and sisters – stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*”(1 Corinthians 15: 55-58)

And so in closing I would ask each one of you today to place your hope in Jesus Christ. For Him to help you in this life; place your hope in Him for life everlasting, and place your hope in Him in anticipation of the resurrection, and the hope of being reunited with our loved ones who have gone before.