

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
May 20, 2012

The Resurrection and the Life

Read John 11:17-27

Key verse: “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live’” (John 11:25).

“There is a school of thought in Christian circles,” writes D.A. Carson, “that almost views death so much as a blessing that you are not allowed to cry.... [But in the Bible] death is an enemy, and it can be a fierce one.... It is ugly. It destroys relationships. It is to be feared. It is repulsive. There is something odious about death. Never pretend otherwise. But death does not have the last word.... Thank God for a Savior who could claim, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’” (from Carson’s book, *Scandalous*).

This tension between death as a fierce enemy and death as a defeated foe runs throughout John 11. We see this tension in Martha’s response upon meeting Jesus for the first time following the death of Lazarus, her brother....

Verses 17 says, “When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.” Bible scholars tell us that a common belief among the Jews at this time was the belief that, when someone died, his soul lingered near his body for three days, hoping to return to it. But John tells us that when Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus’ body had already been in the tomb for four days. The point is that by the fourth day everyone knew that Lazarus was gone for good.

All this time, Martha had been dealing with the fact that, when Jesus got word of Lazarus’ sickness, Jesus had not come to his aid. So, along with her normal grief, Martha was also wrestling with the question, “Jesus, why didn’t you come sooner?”

Grief. Hurt. Questions. All mixed with faith. The tension between death as a fierce enemy and death as a defeated foe. All of this can be felt in Martha’s words to Jesus when he arrives in Bethany: “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” (vv. 21-22).

This tension—the tension between death as a fierce enemy and death as a defeated foe—can even be seen in Jesus’ own response....

When word had come that Lazarus was sick, this was Jesus' first response: "When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.' Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days" (John 11:4-6).

Apparently, Jesus knew that he would raise Lazarus from the dead. Yet, when Jesus came to Bethany and saw firsthand the grief and sorrow that Lazarus' death had brought to his friends, even Jesus was touched by death as a fierce enemy: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied.' Jesus wept" (John 11:33-35).

So which is it? Is death our fierce enemy—"repulsive," "ugly." Or is death a defeated foe, to be seen as a blessing. The answer is that death is still an enemy that destroys relationships and tears loved ones apart. And if even Jesus would weep in the face of death, so can we. But death is also a defeated foe! In John 11, we see both truths, and the good news is that death will not have the last word! Why? "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus proclaims. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (v. 25).

"We have faith that does not shrink from death. The fundamental concern of our faith is both to reveal with fearsome accuracy the nature of death, and to draw the sting from it by the victory of the resurrected Christ. We, of all people, need to deny nothing true, the bad and the good. Of all people, we are most able to confess the grand proportions of death: so terrible as to defeat us all!—but defeated, rather, in Jesus" (from *Mourning into Dancing* by Walter Wangerin, Jr.).

Jill Briscoe wrote about the death of a Christian friend: During the funeral visitation, the deceased man's wife and sister stood by the casket, greeting people. The sister kept motioning to her brother's body, saying to each person who came to greet her, "There he is.... There he is." After some time, when the wife could stand it no longer, she turned to her sister-in-law and, in love, said, "If I believed 'there he is,' I would be miserable." Then she added, "Do you know what enables me to get through this day? What gets me through is that I know the truth: 'There he isn't.'"

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.'"

Thanks be to God!

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