

The Raising of Martha

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John 11:1-54

“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” -- John 11:27

In my sermon last week, I admitted that some of my television viewing isn't of the highest caliber, so it won't surprise you that I was watching an episode of Criminal Minds Thursday night that reminded me of what we Christians often misunderstand in the story of the death and resuscitation of Lazarus.

In the Criminal Minds episode, a serial killer is drowning people, strangling people, and suffocating people around a state forest in California. What makes his crime peculiar as well as horrible, however, is that he performs CPR on his victims as soon as they've stopped breathing so that he can bring them back to life – the sort of thing that people like Dave Holtz do as a part of their day's work.

And the reason this killer around the Angeles State Forest temporarily kills people and then brings them back to life is because he is obsessed with the question of what happens to us when we die, the question that haunts many of us. So he resuscitates his victims, questions them intensely about what they saw, what they heard, what they felt when they were dead, and then he kills them again, this time for good, so that they won't dial 911.

We Christians have made a mess of Christianity, in part, because many of us share, to some degree, that killer's obsession. We are desperately afraid of what's going to happen to us when we die; or, if we're convinced that nothing's going to happen to us when we die, then we're desperately sad that this life is all there is.

We're not alone, of course, in having these questions and concerns. But being more concerned about the afterlife than our current life is one of the more serious missteps we can take as Christians, because, as today's gospel reading shows us, faith in Jesus Christ is far more about life before death than it is about life after death.

And we Christians have turned that all around, and that's why I think this story is usually called the raising of Lazarus rather than the raising of Martha. We're focused on the life in this world to which Jesus restores Lazarus, but where our attention really needs to be focused is on the life to which Martha is raised when she confesses Jesus to be the Christ. Lazarus is brought back to this life; Martha is raised to that eternal life which is life with Christ. So let me ask you bluntly: Of those lives, which would you prefer to be yours?

From Lazarus we hear nothing; but from Martha we hear the truth that constitutes the center of Christian belief: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Unless she's lying, which we have no reason to suspect, Martha has taken the first step on her journey into eternal life with Christ. Her brother, Lazarus, is brought back by Jesus to this life, just as Jesus brought back Jairus's daughter and the son of the widow of

Nain. There's nothing unique about Jesus's ability to restore the dead to this life. In fact, the Bible records that both Elijah and Elisha raised people from the dead in the Old Testament, and both Peter and Paul raised people from the dead in the New. The Bible records people being brought back miraculously to this life some nine times.

But being brought back to this life is not what faith in Jesus Christ is about and it's not what resurrection is about and it's not what eternal life is about. Being brought back to this life is to be brought back to old life; faith in Christ is to be ushered into new life. The difference is unspeakably huge.

Now I suspect that by the time most of us in this room reach our age, a fair number of us have a list of "What if's" and "If only's" and "If I had it to do over again's." Most of us would jump at the chance Lazarus and the others I mentioned got in the Bible – the chance to return to this life from the dead. That's what that killer in Criminal Minds was so obsessed about.

But that's just what the Christian faith is not about. Believing in Jesus Christ isn't about getting more of this life; it's about getting a new life altogether. It's about getting a life that's so different from the life you lived before that you can say, as Paul said, "It is no longer I who live; it is Christ who lives in me."

And how do you get that life? Not simply by mouthing a few words – such as "I believe in Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior" -- or by undergoing a ritual, such as baptism.

You get that new life in Christ by living the life that the crucified and risen Jesus Christ lived both before and after his resurrection: a life of peace, a life of compassion, a life of justice, and a life of utter non-violence.

And the only way to live such a life is to totally surrender the ego – the old life – in exchange for a new life shaped and guided completely by God. That's how you live a life made up of those realities – peace, compassion, justice, non-violence – that are eternal. When you embody those realities so completely that people see not you embodying those realities but simply those realities themselves, you will, as Jesus promised, never die. Your body will die, but your body is no longer you and you are no longer your body. You have become the embodiment of the values for which Jesus lived, taught, died, and was raised, and those values never die. That's the eternal life waiting for you in Jesus the Christ. That's the life that was waiting for Martha, and that's the life to which Martha was raised.

As another Martha of our own age would say, that's a good thing. In fact, it's a great thing, and the only thing, finally, that matters. Eternity matters. How will you be spending yours?