

If You Had Been There
 (A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett)
 March 9, 2008—Massanutten Presbyterian Church

John 11:1-45

I suspect most of you remember seeing a film played in reverse at some point in your life. I can remember our teachers doing that often when I was in school—back in the days before SOLS made every minute of class time sacred. We would laugh hysterically as the film played backwards on the screen as we watched things which had disintegrated suddenly coming back together, buildings shaken to pieces by earthquakes rising again before our eyes, people who had been knocked to the ground suddenly springing back to life. That is what this text is about today—God's power to run the film in reverse, to overcome the gravity of life, to address a problem in life which you and I cannot solve.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross, the one-time guru of death and dying in our culture once wrote these lines:

"So recognize the supreme secret:
 Death will one day take life from you."

But that is not the problem addressed by this text from John. Kubler Ross continues:

"so while you are able,
 take the death from your life."

That is the problem. Taking the death from our lives is easier said than done. It is a truth amply witnessed to by shelf upon shelf of self-help books available in book stores. Has it ever occurred to you, that if any one of those books could really solve the problem, we would not need all of the others which surround them on the shelves. I do not mean that some of them are valueless. Many have helpful insights into how we live our lives. Yet, whether it is a book describing the dynamics of co-dependence, addictive personalities, seven spiritual laws of success, or meditative techniques for managing stress—regardless of how valuable these may be—the old problem still lies just beneath the surface of our lives with its power to draw us back and entomb us in destructive behavior. Like gravity, there is something in life which you and I simply cannot overcome or transcend—a problem we cannot solve.

For some it reveals itself as despair following a major loss in life: a loved one, a job, meaningful work, a sense of purpose. For others it is being tied to a habit, an addiction, an obsession, a personal tie or broken relationship which continues to rob life of joy.

For some, it is a job which they confess is "killing them" or a relationship in which they are "dying." In both cases, those phrases may be more truth than

poetry, as research is continuing to confirm that such stress and lack of meaning may actually lead not only to heart disease but also to some forms of cancer. What is more troubling still, in most cases people feel powerless to look for alternatives, actually preferring to die than risk change.

For others it is a profound sense of meaninglessness spurred on by news reports of two college students being killed in the streets, the sub-human behavior of all war only hinted on the news, or simply weariness with the empty election year rhetoric which promises easy solutions to entrenched problems, served up in sound-bites which actually distort the truth. As the old prayer puts it, we are dealing with “death in the midst of life.”

And, while some would suggest that all of this will be worked out in the end, when we are finally freed from earth and with God in heaven, when we have entered life after death, that is not what John would affirm. This lesson is less about resurrection to eternal life after death than about resurrection in the midst of the graveyard we call life—the death that gets up and walks along through life with us. It is about God taking death out of our lives.

Out of despair, Mary and Martha call Jesus to come and heal their brother, whose sickness has him on the verge of death. At first, Jesus does not respond, knowing that the miracle about to unfold is more profound than simply healing Lazarus. When he does arrive, Lazarus has been dead four days. Martha, running to meet Jesus, angrily confronts him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Has that question ever sounded from your lips, or at least been spoken deep inside you? “Lord, if you had been there...” is the cry of all of those who have been tormented by death in any of its myriad forms, who have raised their fist in anger at life or at God or at the doctor or the counselor or the spouse. It’s the utter desperation of one who believes, but whose belief has been dashed. Martha gives voice for all of us who have ever thought that God didn’t show up, or at least didn’t show up in time to help.

But her anger quickly turns to pleading, to which Jesus replies "Your brother will rise again." Martha, sharing the Pharisee's belief in an ultimate resurrection, fails to see what Jesus means, to which Jesus responds with the well known words: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Does she believe it? Of course she does. But that does not solve her problem. She and her sister have lost not only a beloved brother, but also their entire livelihood and security.

Martha's grief and that of her sister and friends—their sense of helpless despair—move Jesus as well. But he was more than moved; we read he was deeply disturbed in spirit. The words "Jesus began to weep" are too tame for what the text

really says. These are not the tears shed over the loss of a friend. The word which describes Jesus' behavior, means "to cry out" with a spontaneous eruption deeper than mere sobs and tears. The violence of it is reflected in the surprise of the onlookers, whose own grieving is interrupted—yet they miss his more profound sense of outrage, and confuse the tears as simply a sign of loss.

But Jesus weeps, not because of his loss of Lazarus; he will soon do something about that. He cries out in rage at the death which covers all of life—the gravity of life, the problem which is beyond all our solving. His is the rage of protest over slaughtered children on college campuses or city streets, the mindlessness of conflict which erupts in ethnic cleansing in places like Darfur or Iraq, the feuds which continue to set one against another, the warped nature of things which reduces living to dried bones, and life to a graveyard. Barely controlling his rage, Jesus orders the stone removed and commands that Lazarus come forth. And come forth he does, wrapped head to foot in the strips of burial cloth. "Unbind him," says Jesus, "and let him go!"

Jesus had said "I am the resurrection and the life," not "I have power to raise you up on the Last Day." He is saying, "I am the one who can bring you to life now. I alone can solve the problem—I can take the death away from your life." Martha had a faith in life beyond death; my guess is most people do. But it was death in life which had her desolate. The gift Jesus offered her and her sister, offered her brother, was not about the future, but about the present. This same gift he offers to you and to me.

This text is not about the future, but about the present. It is about Jesus' power to unbind us and let us go—freeing us from those things which would entomb us. The resurrection and life which he offers, he offers now: living water which never again will leave us thirsty for life, sight in a world which is otherwise blind to the ways God daily touches our lives, power to love rather than destroy our enemies, power to forgive, even when we cannot forget. That, and only that, can remove the death from our lives.

In the midst of the constant struggle against death's reign in life, Jesus offers us himself, and promises that those who welcome him—who make him Lord of life—find the film running in reverse: resurrection from addiction, new life from deadly past. It is not an invitation to do the impossible—to transcend a problem we cannot solve. Rather, speaking your name, speaking my name, he calls each of us out of the caves which have entombed us. Those who come forth at his command discover the gift of his Spirit which not only reverses the powers of death, but which unbinds us and gives us new life. Those who say "yes" to him, come stepping into life discovering it is not a problem to be solved after all, but a gift to be lived out of God's power and God's spirit.