

**Sermon: Sunday, March 26, 2023 – Lent 5 - John 11: 1-45**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev Greg Wooley**

I'm so pleased that *The Voice* Bible translation gives us these dramatic dialogue versions of scripture, to help us really step inside a hard yet hopeful story like this one of Jesus and his beloved friends Martha, Mary and Lazarus. This format invites us into the scene itself or at the very least, invites us to imagine ourselves within one of those early Christian *Ekklesia* gatherings, marvelling at these amazing stories of Jesus.

It's good to get as close as possible to this incident with Jesus and his beloved ones, because for me, at least, it's really easy to keep my distance from the core event going on here by staying in my head, and not engaging its emotional gravitas:

- I keep my distance from this story if all I do is explain its significance within the overall structure of the gospel of John.
- I keep my distance from this story if all I do is describe the function of miracle stories, and weigh the pros and cons of viewing it as metaphor or fable or literary device.
- I keep my distance from this story if I ignore John's assertion that it was this event, the claim by Lazarus that Jesus made him alive again, that got Jesus crucified.

So what would it take, to get closer?

I know I've told you this story before, but I can't read this passage without putting it through an event from 1986, and a course at Vancouver School of Theology entitled simply, "the fourth gospel." In this class, Professor Jim Martin gave us so much to consider about the gospel of John that our heads would spin. It was good to have that academic rigor, and be pushed to engage the key passages in the gospel of John from every possible angle.

But then came the day when we were dealing with this passage. Jim held a Bible in his hand, and was dispassionately reading the gospel to us:

<sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.<sup>[f]</sup> Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

At that moment, Jim stopped reading, put down the Bible, looked straight at us, and asked us the searing question: "well, DO YOU?"

Jim asked a room full of students preparing to be preachers a question we'd better be able to answer if we were to have the audacity to step into a pulpit week after week in the name of Jesus Christ. Jim took this question from Jesus to Martha and aimed it straight at us. Did we believe that Jesus raises us from death to new life? Did we believe this promise of life everlasting?

And that, to me, is what it means to come up close to Jesus, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Amidst the tears of Mary and Jesus, amidst Martha's willingness to push Jesus on this, amidst the grief and the anger and the confusion, amidst the stench of four-day-old death, Jesus speaks life and Jesus brings life. Lazarus is raised and Jesus promises that for all who open themselves to the sacredness of this life, there is life beyond life.

And Jesus, the resurrection and the life, keeps showing up over and over again, whenever we need to know that following death, there is resurrection.

Jesus brings life anew in all the little deaths and resurrections of our lives: when jobs or relationships come to an end, when life goals are no longer attainable, when we need to let go and let God. I can say first-hand, after crashing in 1999 and seeking employment a year later, what came next was an amazing twelve year run working at my kids' school, a job that was busy and fun and unlocked parts of me that had been buried for years and pushed me to learn skills that serve me well even today. That, for me, was being raised to life again.

Jesus brings life anew when we've hit rock bottom, even when life stinks. A week ago, a number of us gathered in person and online to express our thankfulness for the life and ministry of Rev Wayne Lewry, in a funeral led by his close friend and colleague, Rev. Michael Ward. Wayne for many years led the Celebrate Life Recovery evening service at Central United Church in Calgary, a service that combined an open AA meeting and a service of Christian worship. Thousands of souls in need went to those services over the years, and Jesus was there too, embracing twelve steppers with the gift of new life for those ready to start over again.

Jesus brings life anew at points of crisis – natural disasters, war, persecution, eco-anxiety, anything that turns lives upside down – and offers a new start, through programs of resettlement, through refugee sponsorship, through faith-based environmentalism, through humanitarian outreach in God's name.

Jesus is present every time that tears of grief or anguish are shed, never deflecting our tears with empty words about "God's plan", always bringing love and hope. The classic words in the middle of this scripture, "Jesus wept," indicate not only Jesus' closeness to Mary and Martha and Lazarus, but the heart of God that breaks each time that our hearts break.

Jesus is with me every time I am asked by a widow or widower who just lost their spouse "my beloved one is freed from pain now, right?" and I can say with confidence, "yes, I believe in life beyond life, and I can say for sure that suffering stays on this side of the veil."

And Jesus promises resurrection even as mainline Canadian Churches peer into the abyss. We are reminded of the holy cycle of death and resurrection, and in some cases, the new life might have a bit of "back to the future" to them. Our Church amalgamation has led me to recall ways that the Canmore congregation has responded to local need over the years, and here in Banff we have the heritage of the "Unsquare Cellar," housed here in the Church basement in the 1960s and 1970s to reach out to young summer workers who felt very, very adrift. As I look back at those things and imagine what is ahead, I have no doubt that there new life to be had here, as Christ reaches out to the needs of these mountain towns.

The situation Jesus entered at Bethany was beyond dire: Lazarus had died, Mary and Martha were grief-stricken, and even there, even then, there was LIFE. Life anew, life everlasting, a life force that would not be defeated even amidst the forces of death that try to diminish life or even extinguish it. In worship, at communion, as we answer that Jim Martin question about whether WE believe that Jesus can be and bring the power of resurrection, we come close to God in Christ. And in so doing, we open ourselves to life anew. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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*Each Sunday in Lent we've been looking at one of the five modes of Lived Faith outlined by Rev Dr Janet Gear in her portrayal of the Church as a "Theological Banquet." Today we reach the fifth and final place setting at this banquet table, which Janet calls "Ecclesial."*

#### The Theological Banquet: ECCLESIAL

Just to back up a step, the Greek word *Ekklesia* originally referred to 'The political assembly of citizens of an ancient Greek state' (Free Dictionary). In the New Testament, 'The *ekklesia* is a group of people who have been called out of the world and to God; that is, the church'. (Compelling Truth) The term *Ekklesia* can be applied to a local gathering of Christ-followers, or to the Church in its largest, universal sense— the community of all believers in Christ.

The Ecclesial faith, then, is intimately connected to who we are as Church and the things we do, for one another and for the world, as Church. To quote Janet Gear (p.73), "The ecclesial stream is made up of Christians who somewhere deep within them have been gifted with the beautiful ancient faith of...the Church and trust that by the grace of God, the Risen Christ is at work in the world through what the church does simply by being the church. To serve one another, to serve Christ, to serve the church: this is one motion for the ecclesial".

In Janet's experience of the United Church of Canada, this is the largest stream, to the point that she names four sub-divisions: "the Ecclesials' lived faith can be animated in four directions: service, discipleship, worship, and community belonging". (Gear, p.73) Service relates to the shared work and good work that we do together as Church, overlapping to a degree with those of a Missional faith. Discipleship involves learning, growing, being shaped by the ethical teachings of Jesus, in everything from Sunday School to Adult faith formation groups. Worship, for the ecclesial, likely travels with them: we have lots of Ecclesial folks visit us in the summertime, coming to Worship with us even when on holidays. And community belonging, well, that's when we hear the Church described as family or beloved community.

Today's service, and many of the prayers, follows the form of A Sunday Liturgy, published by the United Church of Canada in 1984, the year I entered seminary. It's a very Ecclesial form of worship and a big part of my Theological training back then. I hope that it speaks to those of you who closely identify with the Ecclesial stream of lived faith, and that it enlivens curiosity amongst those whose primary faith response is one of the other four we've explored in this season of Lent.

#### References cited:

<https://www.compellingtruth.org/definition-ekklesia.html>

Gear, Janet. *Undivided Love: Navigating Landscapes of Living Faith*. Altona, MB: Friesen, 2022.

<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/ecclesia>