



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for February 23, 2020
“Faith and Eternal Life”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: John 11:17-27

Our series on faith draws to a close today.

From the very beginning of the series I have been struck by the passage from Galatians 5:6, *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.”*

In all that we have talked about—Faith and Assurance, Faith and Power, Faith and Doubt, Faith and Self-Reliance, Faith and Science, Faith and Salvation, Faith and Righteousness, and even today Faith and Eternal life—may it be that our *“faith is expressing itself in love.”*

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

“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. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” (John 11:17-27)

The entire city has mourned this past week the untimely deaths of two Louisville moms and their daughters who were involved in an automobile accident while traveling to a volleyball tournament last weekend.

Carrie Urton McCaw and Lesley Drury Prather and their twelve year old daughters were tragically killed when they were hit head-on by a pickup truck that crossed the median just outside of St. Louis.

Both funeral services were jammed with people trying to gain a sense of consolation in the midst of their grief. There is nothing quite like an unexpected death to give us pause to not only consider this life, but the next.

I am sure each service featured a lot of things said about each individual and how much they'd be missed. I am also sure there was much said about the sure promises of God that for those who so believe there is eternal life.

Considering Eternal Life

John 3:16 puts it this way, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son and whosoever believes in him would not perish, but have everlasting life."*

Martin Luther called that great passage, *"the gospel in miniature."*

John 3:16 gives us all encouragement, particularly when we consider our own mortality.

Not to be overly moribund on a Sunday morning, but if there is one thing in life we can be assured of every one of us will one day die. We know not when or how, but die we will. Death is just a fact of life.

What we think about regarding death is the stuff of faith.

Immediately, any consideration of life after death conjures up thoughts of heaven and hell and where one will spend eternity.

It puts us at once to thinking about God's judgement.

I put a lot of stock in the fact that God is a loving, righteous judge and only he can judge the heart.

I like the story told of the man who had lived a pretty rough life. He found himself in the hospital for surgery. Coming out from under the anesthetic, he noticed the blinds to his hospital room were drawn. He complained to the nurse that he could not see out and asked why they were drawn in the first place.

"Oh, calm down," said the nurse. *"There's a big fire burning across the street, and we didn't want you to wake up and think that the operation was a failure."*

Our interest today is not to so much to parse the difference between heaven and hell, but to put our focus on God's great promise of life with him for all eternity, the promise he makes through Jesus Christ.

We talk about such things at Easter upon celebrating Christ's resurrection. It's okay to talk about such things at other times of the year as well, you know? In fact, we ought to talk about such things all the time.

The fact of Christ's resurrection forms the very bedrock of the Christian faith. It's not only the foundation of our faith, but has a way of lifting us to new heights as well.

Jesus himself said, *"I am the resurrection and life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."*

Jesus said a lot about himself in what are termed the *"I am"* statements. This one where he talks of being *"the resurrection and life"* is the greatest of them all.

I remember years ago preaching at a revival in Cadiz, Ky. and using this great scripture. I thought it was just the thing to get people to thinking about the eternal destination of their souls.

Afterward a man come up to me and said, *“Well, that certainly was an interesting use of funeral scripture.”*

I have used that scripture as well at any number of funerals. It’s funeral scripture. It’s Easter scripture. It’s scripture for the whole of life.

The Apostle Paul wrote in I Corinthians 15:14, *“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”*

The Christian faith is built upon the hope and promise of Christ’s resurrection. Without it what we believe is simply a house of cards. The Christian movement would have crumbled in short order and the church never formed if Jesus had not risen from the dead.

All along people have wondered if this *“three score and ten”* is all there is. God provides the answer in his Son Jesus Christ.

Author and pastor, Donald Strobe writes that *“the disciples didn’t try and explain the resurrection, the resurrection explained them.”*

The resurrection was the very thing that formed their identity as Christians. They were an *“Easter People,”* and so are we, all because of Christ’ resurrection.

Do You Believe?

“I am the resurrection and life,” says Jesus. *“The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”*

What follows though really gets to the nub of the issue. Jesus asks, *“Do you believe?”* (John 11:26)

That question was asked of Martha while her brother Lazarus lay in the grave. Lazarus had been dead four days. The Jews would have thought his spirit had already vacated his body. From their perspective there was no hope.

Martha, in fact, was a bit perturbed that Jesus had waited so long in coming. She had confidence that he could have healed her brother; to raise him from the dead was another thing entirely.

Jesus though pressed Martha about such things and all she could think about was *“the resurrection on the last day.”*

Jesus had other things in mind. He wanted her to stretch her faith to include even grander things.

Rembrandt proves the old adage to be true, *“A picture is worth a thousand words.”* His painting of the raising of Lazarus has Mary and Martha kneeling to the side of their brother just rustling from the dead.

There are others looking on in total amazement and Jesus front and center with outstretched arms bring Lazarus out of the grave.

It's Christ's question and Martha's response that seals the deal.

"Do you believe?" asks Jesus.

Whereupon Martha responds, *"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah the Son of God, who is to come into the world."*

Martha had settled in her own heart and mind who Jesus was and what he had to offer.

Of course, we know the raising of Lazarus as Christ's last miracle before his death and resurrection. I call it *"a major league miracle."*

It precedes what Jesus is about to do himself and in that the message comes through loud and clear, Christ has power over death itself.

So it comes to us to answer for our own lives the same question asked of Martha, *"Do you believe?"*

Do you believe that Jesus is all power for this life and for the next? Are you settled about such things?

When scientist, Michael Faraday was dying, some journalists questioned him about his *speculations* about life after death. Faraday was a believer, after all.

Upon hearing those questions, Faraday replied, *"Speculations! I know nothing about speculations. I am resting on certainties. I know that my Redeemer lives, and because he lives, I shall live also."*

What Difference Does It Make?

What difference does it make then if we believe that there is such a thing as eternal life and that Christ has paved the way for that to happen?

The differences are many for this life and the next.

Taking the long view of eternity:

- Offers a degree of fulfillment to this life. We realize that our fleeting days here on earth aren't all there is.
- Takes some of the pressure off the mundane. The day to day doesn't seem nearly as weighty.
- Keeps us from being so pre-occupied with death. When the stuff of eternal life is settled, the sting of death is not quite the same.
- Offers joy because we know eternal joy awaits us.

- Helps us engage the whole of life more faithfully. If we know how the final chapter is written, we are able to go about writing the other chapters of our lives a lot more courageously.

When we know we have some place to go, we are much better able to turn loose of things in the here and now. A strong sense of eternal life can transform the very way we live our lives.

Dealing with Our Grief

Everyone grieves in their own way. Some are able to go on and deal with it in the midst of daily life. Others tend to pull away and re-engage life slowly. Some show a lot of emotion, others don't. Some simply have a hard time overcoming.

Being well-convinced of eternal life brings consolation like nothing else can.

I remember a few years back upon concluding a graveside service at Resthaven Cemetery noticing a woman who was a member of the church at St. Paul. She was standing in front of a gravestone and looked like she was none too pleased. I could hear her talking from a pretty far distance away.

I approached her and asked her how she was doing. She told me that she regularly visited her husband's grave to tell him just how angry she was that he was now gone.

We talked about that and on a number of occasions after that.

She hadn't quite let the wonderful promise of eternal life sink in. Her grief clouded her faith and, to be quite honest with you, it had really done a number on her life.

Here's a contrasting story. A wife visited the graveside of her recently deceased husband. At her side was her young daughter.

It was a pretty stark scene, until the little girl bolted ahead and began to turn summersaults. Evidently, she did those all the time to her dad's delight.

The mom realized then that life would go on, that all would be well, that joy would come, and that her husband was now with the Lord joyously worshipping and praising God for all eternity.

When it comes to faith and eternal life we essentially let go so we might experience the deeper truths of life.

That certainly happens upon suffering the loss of a loved one.

It also happens, when we let go and finally give ourselves to the Lord—now and forever more.

In Christ, God promises abundant life now and eternal life later on. For me, it boils down to that.

"Do you believe?" I pray you do.