

28th April 2024 – John 11:20-27 (Is 53:10-54:3) ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life’

As times of the year go, this is the season of resurrection. All around us, new life is appearing. The bluebells are out now – one of my favourite times of year. The trees are covered with that glorious light-green spring foliage that’s almost luminous in the sunshine. It reminds us that **our God is the God of new life. And we as humans were made for life.** Whilst we all have to face the reality of our mortality, there is something deep inside us that yearns for life, real life, what we looked at last week – what Jesus calls ‘zoe life’ – true fullness of life.

Next week I’ll take the funeral at St Mary’s of one of our dear church members, and as I usually do, at the committal I will offer this declaration: ‘We look for the fullness of the resurrection.’ Had the burial taken place there and then, I would have gone on to say: ‘...in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our frail bodies that they may be conformed to his glorious body – who died, was buried and rose again for us. To him be glory for ever. Amen.’

And for all those who will gather next week what they will want to hear was not just a celebration of their loved one’s life, important though that was – the happy memories and the love they shared. They want to know that this was not the end, that there was the hope of new life, of restoration – of resurrection.

This promise of new life lies at the heart of the hope of our faith. And **it is a promise we can be sure of because we worship a Risen Saviour.** The resurrection of Jesus Christ remains the focal point of our hope: St Paul declares at the start of Romans that Jesus was ‘proved with power to be the Son of God *by his resurrection from the dead.*’ Jesus’ death and resurrection go hand in hand, and both get equal billing in scripture. Of course, there can be no resurrection without Jesus first dying for us, and so we rightly put the cross at the centre of our faith. But if Jesus’ death assures our forgiveness and clears the way for deep friendship with God, his resurrection assures us of everything else: his identity, his promise of life, and of the restoration of all things.

And the famous story of Lazarus in John chapter 11 tells us not just that there is the hope of resurrection in a general sense – but that **Jesus is the resurrection. It all comes through him.**

But before we get onto that in more detail, let’s recap the story, as we only read a bit of it here – and in doing so, the risk is that we miss the rollercoaster that surrounds this beautiful moment between Martha and Jesus. The chapter starts with Jesus delaying his visit – just take a moment to imagine this moment: you’re one of the disciples, now left waiting around, scratching your head. What is Jesus doing?

Even when he sets off, Jesus appears to take his time, since his delay was only two days, but Lazarus had been in tomb for four days when he arrived. Emotions are running high, as often happens when someone is close to death, or has just died. The disciples’ primary emotions are not just confusion, but fear: they are genuinely afraid of martyrdom, or at least trouble. Then you have the mourning crowd – and if you’ve ever been to a Semitic funeral, you’ll know that it’s very loud.

Then there’s Mary, who is so cross with Jesus that she won’t even go out to meet him at first, leaving busy older sister Martha to deal with practicalities as usual. Jesus himself sobs for his friend – the word for ‘deeply moved’ literally means ‘his guts wrenched’. And even when we get the happy ending, this great drama kickstarts a chain of events that would lead to Jesus’ death.

All in all, it's not a narrative you can just airbrush. In that sense, what we see is the drama of real life as we experience it; it might be 2,000 years ago, but when you look at the emotions of the people, we can rightly say: *is this not our world?* There is uncertainty, loss, misunderstanding, resentment; there is grief and heartache, tears of desolation and of joy. It's all there.

Through it all, **Jesus comes to speak a simple word, and to ask a simple question (vv25-26):** "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?"

Trouble has a way of unmasking essentials of life. It strips away the trappings, and confronts us with ultimate realities. When all is said and done, what do we hang on to? Faced with our doubts, our loss, our grief, our troubles, *where is the hope?*

Our hope is in this verse. We can try looking elsewhere, and sadly our culture mostly looks pretty much *anywhere* other than the Lord of life. But this story reminds us that, whatever the appearance of things, Jesus is in control, and Jesus can bring us true life.

And so, Jesus can reassure Martha as she mourned the death of her brother: 'Your brother will rise again.' Why? Because Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life. **What Jesus did first he gives to all who trust in him. His eternal life ensures ours.** We too will die – but we will also rise to eternal life. We are made for eternal life in the presence of Jesus, enjoying and worshipping him forever.

That is a seriously amazing hope – if that doesn't put a song in your heart today, I'm not sure what will! But it doesn't stop there – or rather, I should say, it doesn't *start* there. Because **this future hope is not just something way off in the distance. The promises of Jesus begin this side of the grave. Resurrection life starts now.** We are united with the risen Saviour *now*. Jesus' life-giving Spirit comes to dwell in us *now*. We may all have to begin that resurrection life with our current limited bodies, but at some level we start to live this new *zoe* life, this *resurrection life today*.

As the baptism service puts it, we 'die to sin that we may live his risen life.' When I say that to the candidate or their family at the start of the ceremony, I'm not talking about heaven, I'm talking about *now*. As I've said before, **following Jesus is about learning how to live in heaven before you die.** Wow! Just take a moment to absorb that: how would you describe your Christian life? How about this: 'learning how to live in heaven before you die.'

So, this is not just about future hope, but present hope, too. And, as I close, I've got a secret for you today: I've read the end of the story – Jesus wins! This simple faith is not an escape from reality but the ultimate reality. Oh that the world would see this again! We see so many lost, directionless people, so much insecurity, so many addictions...

Maybe some of us are battling too. Things are tough: health worries, work worries, family worries. Here's the simple word for us today. Jesus says the same to us as he said to Martha: "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?"

Do we believe this? Will we stand once more on the rock? Will we receive the glorious truth that in Jesus is life and life in all its fullness, because he is the resurrection and the life? May God grant us grace to journey with Martha to the edge of the village, to meet with Jesus, and to find once more in him the answer to our deepest needs/fears/longings, that we might say, with her: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." Amen.