2023 Easter Sunday Sermon

**THE MYSTERY OF LIFE AND DEATH**

John 11:1-26

Key Verse: 11:25-26

“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?’”

Last Friday was Good Friday which commemorates the suffering, crucifixion, and death of Jesus Christ. In Jerusalem, many believers and pilgrims from all over the world observe Good Friday by following “***the Way of the Cross (Via Dolorosa).”*** *(pic#1 &1-b)* Our young people in NY-UBF also observed Good Friday. Jesus told his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take their cross and follow me.” (Mt. 16:24) We surely must deny ourselves and take up the cross not once a year but daily and follow Jesus. However, if Jesus suffered and was brutally executed on the cross, why is it called Good Friday? It’s because, by his death, Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins and arose from the dead on the third day. Good Friday is always tied to Easter Sunday. If Christ had not been raised, we wouldn’t call it Good Friday but Bad Fright. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. ***“Happy Easter! Christ is risen!”***

The story of raising Lazarus from the dead in today’s passage is the most powerful theme John makes about Jesus, the Son of God. Before raising Lazarus, Jesus told Martha that he was the resurrection and the life. And anyone who believes in him will experience resurrection. Let’s read verses 15 and 16 once again. “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?” Jesus didn’t say that he was just the resurrection. He said that he was the resurrection and the life. In his statement, we see the mystery of life and death, which we will explore today.

Look at verses 1-3. “Now, a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary, and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick.’” These verses set the stage for the story in Chapter 11. It shows the love relationship, especially the close emotional ties, between Jesus and the siblings of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. It seems Lazarus was critically ill. Otherwise, Marth and Mary would not have sent the urgent message to Jesus. The phrase “the one you love is sick” is the message *“Lord. Come, quickly before Lazarus dies.”*

How did Jesus respond to it? Look at verse 4. “When he heard this, Jesus said, ‘This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.’” Jesus’ statement in this verse reveals what was in Jesus’ mind in dealing with Lazarus’ sickness. Jesus wanted to raise Lazarus from death which would glorify him as the Son of God. But the miracle of raising Lazarus would also be the preview of his own resurrection from death on the cross. That’s why he said, “So that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” It's not so difficult for us to see what Jesus meant. However, at that time, Jesus’ disciples could not understand it.

Look at verses 5-7. “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, ‘Let us go back to Judea.’” Even though Jesus received an urgent call that Lazarus was critically ill, he lingered for two days, during which Lazarus died. In his divine consciousness, Jesus knew when and how Lazarus would die. He was not distressed by the death of Lazarus because he knew what he would do. Then he told his disciples that they should go back to Judea.

Look at verse 8. “‘But Rabbi,’ they said, ‘a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?’” The disciples were hesitant to return to Judea because they feared the Jews who threatened to kill Jesus, possibly them also. Even though Jesus was with them always, the disciples were in spiritual darkness because of fear, especially the fear of death.

Acknowledging their fear, Jesus explained how they should overcome fear in life. Look at verses 9-10. “Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble for they have no light.’” Even ordinary people can walk safely during the day because they are in the light. But they can slip and fall when no light is available at night. By implication, Jesus meant that the one with the light of God inside would not stumble either by day or night. The disciples’ fear shows that they were in spiritual darkness. Spiritually speaking, it’s not the circumstances but the fear that makes us stumble. So, it’s vital to identify fear in us.

What is your greatest fear? What are you afraid of? Sometimes, it’s obvious. For example, if we have a severe car accident through which we get injured, and our car is damaged, we suffer from PTSD (Post-Traumatic-Stress- Disorder). But sometimes, fear is hard to identify, yet an unknown fear drives people. They are not even aware of what they are afraid of. They are in denial. If we want the light of God to shine on us, the first step is to identify the darkness of fear in us. It’s okay to be afraid and not avoidable because we are humans. But it’s not okay to let fear dominate us. 1 John 4:18 states, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

Look at verses 11-16. The story in these verses stresses the fact that Lazarus is dead. Jesus shares his view of death. “After he had said this, he told them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.’ His disciples replied, ‘Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.’ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead, and for your sake, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’” Jesus used an understatement for being dead by saying, “My friend Lazarus has fallen asleep.” Yet when his disciples didn’t understand, he used plain language: “Lazarus is dead.”

Then Jesus explained by saying, “For your sake, I am glad I was not there so that you may believe.” What did he mean by this? It means that raising Lazarus from the dead was to confirm their faith. Faith in what? What do you think? Jesus’ power? Yes. But more than that. It will confirm belief in the resurrection, **not just Jesus’ resurrection but the resurrection itself.**

When someone we love dies, we say, *“He went to heaven,*” or “*He went to God,”* or “*He fell asleep,*” etc. We often use such understatement because we don’t want to admit death is ultimate and final. Isn’t it true when we consider God said to Adam, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust, you will return.” (Gen. 3:19) Once we die and are buried, our body deteriorates and turns into a handful of ashes in a matter of time. Death seems to be the absolute reality.

But when Jesus said that Lazarus had fallen asleep and was going there to wake him up, he declared that the ultimate reality is not death but resurrection. This is the great truth of the gospel, which would be demonstrated first by the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection and later in a much more excellent way by the resurrection of Christ Jesus himself. The resurrection of the dead is the mystery of God’s salvation. 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 states, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” We know we all die. But our ultimate reality is not physical death but resurrection.

We celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. However, overcoming the reality of death in our lives is hard, like fear and sorrow. There is a sting of death that impales people. Once we are pierced by it, it’s hard to overcome. We become wounded, fearful, and sad. It’s a pain in our souls.

Verses 17-26 describe the meeting between Jesus and Martha, the sister of Lazarus, which convinced the cold reality of the death of Lazarus. Look at verses 17-20. “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 losing their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, but Mary stayed home.” The four days Lazarus had been in the tomb ensured his body was decayed. Many friends from Jerusalem came to comfort Martha and Mary in their grief. When Martha and Mary heard Jesus was coming, Martha went out, but Mary didn’t, apparently because her brother’s death hurt her and also Jesus, who didn’t come early enough in time he, might have prevented her brother’s death.

Look at verses 21-24. “‘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.’” Even though Martha blamed Jesus for her brother’s death because of his late coming, she quickly added a statement of faith, “But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” Yet, it’s interesting that she couldn’t say, *“If you ask God, my brother will be raised from the dead.”* Why not? Of course, she thought it was too much of an impossibility.

Jesus quickly responded to her by saying, “Your brother will rise again.” (23) Martha replied, *“I know, I know Jesus. I believe that my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”* (24) The confession of faith Martha made was theologically correct. It was a general belief about life after death among the Jews at the time of Jesus, except for the Sadducees. However, the idea of the resurrection on the last day was too remote and uncertain for Martha. The vague hope of the future resurrection didn’t provide much comfort for the grieving Martha and Mary at the loss of her dear brother Lazarus. Martha’s confession of faith was ineffective and as good as dead.

In verses 25 and 26, Jesus makes a statement that reveals the mystery of life and death. Let’s read verses 25 and 26. “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?’” When we read Jesus’ statement carefully, Jesus identifies himself as the resurrection and the life. He didn’t just say he was the resurrection. He said that ***he is the resurrection AND the life***, conjoining them together. It means resurrection is not just a future event, as many people think it is, like Martha. **Resurrection is life in and through Jesus now and forever.** So, to understand Jesus’ statement in these verses, we need to explore the Greek word for life. I had to research. The Greek language has three different words for life: ***Bios,******Psuche****,* and ***Zoe***. To put it simply:

The word ***“Bios*”** refers to physical life,

the word “***Psuche****” refers* to soul life,

and the word “***Zoe****”* refers to God’s eternal, divine life.

All these Greek words are translated as life in English. But the meaning is very distinct. The Greek word translated as life John 11:25 is not “Bios (Physical life)” or “Psuche (soul-life)” but “Zoe (the eternal, divine life of God or the living principle of life).*”* It reminds us of John 1:4, “In him was **life**, and that **life** was the light of all mankind.” Here, the word “life” is from the Greek word **“Zoe” – the divine life of God.**

The statement “whoever lives by believing in me will never die” is particularly important. The expression “lives by believing in me” means *“lives by believing* ***into or within*** *me.”* It’s a familiar concept in John’s Gospel. For example, Jesus said to his disciples in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing,” In other words, if anyone lives by being attached or connected to the life of Christ Jesus, there is no death. ***The (Zoe) life of Christ*** flows through their spiritual veins. The connection is faith.

The mystery of life is that we have a life now and forever through our faith in Jesus. Modern psychologists (Psychospiritual) would say it is “Individuation” and “Self-actualization” through our faith in Christ Jesus.

What does it mean that we believe in Jesus? It does not mean having superficial confessions of the creeds with our mouths. It means to follow the principle of life, as Jesus commanded us, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mk. 8:34b) That’s what Apostle Paul did and said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

 A couple of weeks ago, I overused my left knee. I began to have knee pain. I thought it would go away soon. But it didn’t. I got acupuncture treatment, but it’s not entirely healed yet. Our physical body does not remain young forever. It gets old and deteriorates. Death is not avoidable. Some people die young unexpectedly, and others die as they grow old. Sadly, we die. But death is not our absolute reality. Our ultimate reality is the resurrection and life in Christ Jesus, available now and forever. Even though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly, we are being renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Our world is unsafe and unpredictable, but the good news is that the mystery of life is available for us in Christ Jesus, who suffered, died on the cross, and conquered death through his resurrection. We now have God’s eternal and divine life through our faith in Christ Jesus. Praise Jesus. Happy Easter!