

Psalm 148
John 11:20-24

Resurrection (before you die)

ForeWord

Some of you, of course, attended Norah's funeral earlier this week.

I want to introduce our Gospel reading today by saying a bit more about what I offered in the sermon there, which has become an almost "standard" thought in my funeral sermons over recent years. (And so this could be an insight into what I might say at *your* funeral, should that privilege fall to me).

To remind those who were there, and bring everyone else up to speed, I observed on Tuesday, the obvious: that funerals are convened not least to remember the one who has died. But, when a funeral is intentionally "Christian", a second story is also told. If the first story is the story of our experience of the one who has died, the second story is an account of *God's* experience of her, and of *us*.

This seems to me to be a useful framing of what a funeral does for two reasons. First, it's true. Christian faith sees our lives as resting in a larger work in which God is engaged. Second, this framing seems to be a gentle way to invite everyone gathered – believers and unbelievers alike – to think a little differently about their own story. *Do I understand myself to be living within a bigger story? And what is that bigger story?*

One of the things we've seen over the last 30 or 40 years is the growth of eulogies in length and number. This is undoubtedly true in non-religious funerals, but we see it even in the churches. And it makes perfect sense. If we don't believe that we're part of a grander story than our own, then it becomes imperative that we tell our own story as loudly and lengthily as we can. This is for sheer sanity's sake, else what was it all for? If there is nothing that makes sense of us, then what little sense we've managed to make or be becomes even more important.

But my concern here is not how to do a good funeral. The two-story concept is a thought we might entertain at any time, and certainly long before we're dead. The question is then only, *What is* the second story which justifies, which gives sense and meaning to, our own personal story?

Our Gospel reading for today tells part of the story of the raising of the dead Lazarus. Up to the point at which our reading begins, Lazarus has died and Jesus has arrived, and speaks with Martha and Mary, the dead man's sisters.

We've thought about this text a couple of times before, with closer attention to the miracle itself, but today my interest is in what Jesus says about his relationship to resurrection and life, that he says this *before* his own resurrection, and what this might mean for our two-storied humanity.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: John 11. 20-44)

Word : Proclamation

Last week, we noted two related things about Jesus' death and resurrection, one more straightforward than the other. The simpler draws on what we saw then in the exchange

between Thomas and Jesus: the risen Jesus still bears the scars of the crucifixion, which seems to be the basis of Thomas' extraordinary confession: "my Lord and my God." The risen Jesus is the crucified Jesus; the marks of Jesus' life are not expunged with the resurrection. Jesus' history continues into whatever resurrection life he now lives.

The second, more challenging thought was this: that the crucified Jesus is the risen Jesus. What this doesn't mean is that the crucified Jesus is the one who *will be* raised. Rather, he is crucified *as* the risen Jesus. Or, still more pointedly, Jesus is "already" risen when he is crucified (and before the crucifixion). This makes little sense because we are accustomed to thinking about the cross and resurrection as sequential events, for the obvious reason that this is how the story unfolds.

But, as we've noticed before, the Gospeller John does not much respect our sense for things. What is at play for John is more who Jesus *is* than what he does or is done to him. Central to the "is-ness" of Jesus is that he does not change throughout the narrative (which John has in common with the other Evangelists).

To say that nothing of Jesus changes is to say that nothing is taken from him, and nothing is added, throughout the story. The Jesus calling disciples in chapter 1 is the Jesus raising Lazarus in chapter 11, is the Jesus being crucified in chapter 19, and is the risen Jesus in chapter 20. The stable thing throughout the narrative is the identity Jesus has from the one who sent him, and towards those to whom he was sent.

What this means for the cross and the resurrection is that Jesus is the same before the cross and after it; the resurrection doesn't change anything about Jesus. (What *does* change at Easter is perception, but this is *outside* of him. We saw this last week in Thomas and Peter, and earlier again in Mary.)

To put it perhaps a little surprisingly, the resurrection doesn't matter *for Jesus*. It doesn't add anything *to him*.

It does matter for us, although not for the reason we usually think. The resurrection doesn't tell us that there is a life which follows death. This would be resurrection-as-addition thinking: that the dead Jesus got a bonus extension, as Lazarus did, and so we might too. Rather, the resurrection matters for us because it is light by which we see now what Jesus was all along: he was always the presence of the reign of God in the world. And what else is the resurrection but just the sign of the presence of God in Jesus – which was always the case. Even before he died, then, Jesus was living resurrection life. His word to Martha – "I *am* the resurrection and the life" – is about now, not what's to come.

This is not a straightforward thought, but an important one. But even if we can accommodate it, we might well ask, So what? This is all quite neat theology, stitching up who Jesus is (or was), but why do normal, sensible people (as distinct from theologians) need to think such curly thoughts?

The thing about neat, stitched-up theology is that it's only *properly* neat when it makes a human difference. Here, to get our head properly around who Jesus is and what happens to him, is to get our head around ourselves.

Remember that we began all this by recalling a funeral sermon's proposal that our experience of ourselves rests in the broader and deeper experience God has of us.

For Christian confession, this broader and deeper experience – God's experience of us – is *Jesus* himself. As small as one person is, in the context of all the people who will ever live, *this* one person's story is confessed to be the story within which all *our* stories are properly nestled.

For Jesus to be “the resurrection and the life”, then, is for him to be the possibility that we can be like him: living a “resurrection life” now, and not in some distant (or not so distant) future, as if we would be incomplete without a resurrection. The second story, God’s experience of us, is our completeness.

That Jesus is the resurrection and the life might be *proven* to be true by his resurrection, but it doesn’t *become* true at that point. It was always the case: he lived as if there were no death.

And so also for us; our second story becomes our first. Whether we think we’ve a little time left or a lot, whether it will be energetic time or now has to be less so, what matters is that the life we have now is given for living, now.

To believe in Jesus is to believe that we have been given all we need to live life in all its fullness. It is, then, time to begin to live.

Do not wait for heaven.

The resurrection and the life are much, much closer than you think.
