

The Coming Out Party? - Sermon Based on John 11:1-45
by David Hindman on Sunday, April 10, 2011

A colleague once embarrassed himself terribly at a wedding. Everyone was in place for the ceremony and in a strong clear voice he began, “Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’” And then in a mortified croak he said, “Oops, sorry; wrong service.” But I think it was a blessed gift bestowed by a gracious God with an endless sense of humor.

We usually associate those words of Jesus with funerals. We’re comforted by his promise that life doesn’t end with our final breath. We have a future that even death cannot end. But that’s only half the story. Jesus says, “I *am* the resurrection and the life.” That’s present tense, not future. The new life he offers affects life *here and now*. Eternal life is defined by *quality*, not quantity. Eternal life is not never-ending days – that could be hell. The eternal life Christ offers simply makes everything we think of as life pale in comparison. My friend accidentally offered that young couple a gift and a promise in Jesus’ words. As they put their trust in Christ’s ways and built a marriage where Jesus would be at home, they’d know resurrection life - eternal life - here and now as wife and husband together.

The story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is a sign that Jesus has that kind of power. Jesus brings God’s eternal life into the world. The

life we see in Christ is transparently full of God's love and light and grace and truth. It's a life of suffering service and humility pointing to God. But it glorifies God because it's completely in tune with the life song of God. That gift of new and resurrected life is ours as the pattern of Christ's life shape ours. We open ourselves more and more to the life of God we see in Christ. The channel of God's life flows into us. Real life is God's life in us. Apart from God living in us, we're as good as dead. As Jesus says elsewhere, apart from him we can do nothing.

We don't usually think this way about life and death. Like our Greek ancestors we think there's an immortal spark within us living on after death. We imagine an immortal soul separating from our physical body and spiritually heaven bound. That's *not* how the Bible necessarily sees things. There's nothing inherently immortal about us. When we die we're 100% dead. As a doornail. Life beyond death is God's gracious gift. Contrary to popular opinion there's no guarantee we automatically have a ticket to celestial bliss. Eternal life here and beyond is Christ's life making a home in us. If there's only a hint of his life in us, it's only a whisper of eternity we receive. But the more our life looks like Christ's, the more abundantly full life we receive and nothing - not even death - can quench its power and beauty.

Christ promises that life. But we're like Martha when she first hears this promise. She nods her head in agreement that a better day is ahead, somewhere, sometime. But in the meantime we're stuck with everyday realities. But then Jesus tells her he *is* that new and eternal life now and he asks, "Do you believe this?" The question's for us, too. Everything hangs in the balance. Do *we* believe Jesus is life, real life, eternal life? Does he give life so beyond what we now know we can't describe it but can only tell stories about it? That life is so amazing and different that what passes for life and death here no longer control us or terrify us. We receive Jesus' resurrection life and what we call life and death are simply shadows in comparison. And that's terribly threatening to the powers that be in this world. No wonder after Jesus raises Lazarus; those in power decide Jesus has to be killed before everything comes undone. Warning – if Christ lives in us, others will feel threatened as well. But it's so worth it to be free from whatever powers hold sway in this world of passing tastes and status.

If we say "Yes, I believe," everything changes. We hear Christ's voice calling us to let his life live in us. And like Lazarus we come forth from darkness into light, from death to life, from a rotting stinking tomb into the fresh bright joy of day. We know our place of death and despair. We feel bound and helpless. And Jesus calls us to step out into freedom and

light and life. I don't know your dead place - abuse or addiction or doubt or fear or grief or loneliness or the rat race of impossible expectations or resignation to a world doomed to war and oppression and poverty and disease. Whatever has killed and buried us, Jesus stands outside and beyond that place and calls us to come forth into new life. Jesus invites us to the greatest coming out party ever and to life that beyond words and description and imagining.

I'm relieved that Lazarus stumbles out still bound up. The miracle isn't complete until others put hands on him to set him free. When we hear the voice of Christ, we don't have to have it all together. Our steps closer to Christ sometimes are faltering. But with the help of others we become unfettered followers of Christ. That's why we need the community of faith. We experience the fullness of resurrection life in company with others who help us become free. And we help them follow Christ more closely. Recently I talked with a friend addicted to pornography. He's heard Christ's call to step out of that tomb. He's not yet fully free but he's stumbling toward the light and brothers in Christ in his local church are helping him loose those ties that bind so terribly.

Sometimes we play at being church. We say all the right things but don't really believe they're true. We don't take the words and ways of Jesus

that seriously. But Jesus still asks, “Do you believe this?” I want to be a part of a church that says “Yes” and steps forth in faith when he calls. I want to be part of a community of Christ followers expecting signs every day that the God of resurrection and life is in our midst and still does amazing things. They *do* happen when God’s love and life take hold of us. My addicted friend knows that. And so does Maggie. Maggie’s a member of the Tutsi tribe in African Burundi. Fifteen years ago she escaped with her seven adopted Hutu and Tutsi children from Hutu militia who massacred most of her family. She found refuge with Hutus in a Catholic bishop’s compound. From the frying pan into the fire, Tutsi militia came there to kill the Hutus. They spared Maggie because she is Tutsi but stripped her naked, tied her up and forced her to watch them massacre 72 people. Thank God her seven adopted children were hiding safe in the church sacristy.

As a Christian Maggie felt called to live the resurrected life Christ promises even in a world of terror and death. She decided to rebuild her village with a new name - House of Peace. She adopted another 25 children by paying local militias for their freedom, set up microfinance to start new businesses, taught sustainable agriculture. She built a swimming pool above tunnels that served as mass graves so the pool’s water could wash children’s minds of violence and immerse them in a joyful imagination. She built a

movie theater. When rebel soldiers threatened to destroy it unless she paid them off, she invited them to watch movies instead, and they did, leaving their weapons at the door. A man came to her village to kill her. She persuaded him he couldn't be happy with a life defined by violence and hatred. Maggie invited him to come to live in the village and to be her driver and help take care of the children. And he did. Today the village has a nursing school, health clinic and hospital built where Maggie's family was slaughtered. Maggie heard Christ's voice calling her to a life beyond anything this world knows - a life filled with God's love more powerful than hatred and violence. Maggie embodies here and now the resurrection and life Christ offers to all. Do you believe this? I do.