

A photograph of a purple hyacinth flower spike and its bulb on a wooden surface, with a gardening trowel nearby. The flower spike is in the upper right, and the bulb with roots is in the lower left. A blue banner with white text is overlaid in the center.

# Future Present

John 11:17-44

# *FUTURE PRESENT*

JOHN 11:17-44

We are at the halfway mark of the season of Lent. However you've decided to observe Lent this year, whatever spiritual discipline you've chosen to connect with Christ more deeply, I hope it is going well for you and proving fruitful. We are also at the halfway point of our worship series exploring some of Jesus' "I am" statements from the Gospel of John. We've had the bread of life, the good shepherd and the gate, and this week, the resurrection and the life, from Jesus and Martha's conversation at the death of her brother.

The "I am" statements offer us a multidimensional portrait of Jesus: his divine and human self, and how he brings together the things of heaven and the things of earth, making them one in himself. Like his other "I am" statements, "I am the resurrection and the life" also blurs the line between heaven and earth, but not perhaps in the way that's most obvious to us in this story.

This chapter of the gospel of John is one of my favourites. There is so much to learn and discover, and there's so many people and significant events happening in it. Most of our Bibles put the title "The raising of Lazarus" on this chapter and we probably think of it that way, too. But although his death precipitates the action of the story, Lazarus is just barely in it, reappearing only briefly at the end. He never actually speaks with Jesus, or responds to what's happened to him, both dying and rising. Which is too bad, because I think that would've been a fascinating conversation. But as it transpires, it's Martha who has the surprisingly deep theological conversation with Jesus. Perhaps we might do better to title this story, Martha's Confession of Faith, instead.

We did not read the entirety of this story today, because it's quite long. We began with Jesus' arrival in Bethany, and read through to the exciting climax of Jesus calling Lazarus out of his tomb. But as extraordinary as Lazarus' resurrection was, that's not the most surprising and unexpected part of this story. The more inexplicable event in the whole tale is that Jesus was late.

Several days ago, before Lazarus died, Jesus was with his disciples at some distance away in Galilee. Things had gotten a bit too heated in the southern part of the region called Judea, and the Jewish authorities were trying to kill Jesus. While they were away, Jesus received word from his friends Mary and Martha that their brother Lazarus was really ill.

Jesus, of course, has been travelling the countryside healing people, complete strangers, so the two women undoubtedly expected that their friend Jesus would come to help them.

But Jesus doesn't rush to Bethany. Instead, he says that this sickness will not end in death, but in a revelation of God's glory in Christ, his Son. Jesus waits.

Two days later, he decides to go back to Judea after all, where Mary, Martha and Lazarus are, and where the powerful people trying to kill him are, too. The disciples do not want to go back there, because it's too risky and really, Lazarus is only sick. It isn't until Jesus rather bluntly declares that Lazarus is dead that the disciples get that he's serious about going back to Bethany, regardless of the danger it's going to put them all in: "Lazarus is dead," Jesus said, "and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

It's a harsh and strange statement for Jesus to make: harsh, because Jesus intentionally waited, staying put in Galilee, while Lazarus got sicker and died; strange, because it sounds as though Jesus likewise intentionally allowed the suffering of his friends.

The disciples give up trying to stop Jesus. The disciple Thomas, the Gospel's own Eeyore, manages to be both incredibly loyal and incredibly gloomy at the same time, stating, "Let's go with him, so we can all die together." So off they go into hostile Judea, to the village of Bethany, arriving two days too late.

Although Jesus loves this family in a very human way - he weeps and mourns with them - he didn't behave in a way that they - and we - might understand as loving. Jesus did not rush to them when they needed him, but waited intentionally. Martha comes out to meet Jesus in the road, away from her grieving sister Mary, away from their friends and neighbours who had come to mourn with them.

Listen closely to what Martha says to him - I'm willing to bet you've said something similar; I know I have - "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died."

“If only...” How many hours a week, a month, a year, do we spend on the “if only” game? Our necks are craned to the past, fantasizing about what could have been, dreaming of would-be outcomes, alternate histories, if only.

If only we’d chosen a different career, if only we’d made that investment, if only we’d married that person; hadn’t lost that person, wasted that opportunity. As if we can change the past. Martha couldn’t; we certainly can’t.

Our “if only’s” often get directed at the future, too. If only this one thing could happen, the future would be just right. If only we could get that promotion, go on that trip, take advantage of that opportunity, find that miracle cure. If only that...then our lives would be so much better.

Martha thinks the same way, it seems. It’s amazing how quickly she goes from what could have been to what will be, at the end of history: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha replied, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Martha’s reply is a doctrine, a well-established and well-known religious belief, from her Jewish tradition about the coming of a Messiah in the future, and the resurrection of all the faithful dead as the culminating event and ending of human history, the end of humanity’s existence. This doctrine is a perfectly correct response to what Jesus said. But it’s rather head-y and vague, and doesn’t really address her very real, immediate grief and concern. Sometimes our doctrines, our formal statements of religious belief can be like that. And it definitely doesn’t answer the question of why Jesus waited.

Poor Martha is in danger of whiplash, so rapidly does she turn her gaze from the unresolved past to straining ahead to see a distant utopian future, where all is made well. But Jesus wants her to leave past and future alone, for a moment, and turn her face toward him. Jesus wants her to train her eyes on the very full abundant present that is available here and now, in Christ’s presence with her: Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Jesus is looking to convince her by his living presence and power that resurrection and life are already available now to everyone who believes. He’s looking to convince you and me as well.



Life is a key concept in the Gospel of John: abundant life, embodied life, everlasting life, eternal life. Many people know John 3:16 by heart, usually in the King James Version: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” And last week, remember how Jesus declared, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Some form of the word life or living occurs over fifty times in this Gospel, from beginning to end. There’s even a special verb, to give life or make alive, that occurs three times, and is only in this gospel. Remember how John began: “In [the Word] was life, and the life was the light of all people.” His gospel ends with life, too: “But these [signs and miracles] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

The life Jesus brings is available to all of us here and now. If we aren’t living it, we may need to ask ourselves why.

The American poet Mary Oliver was a poet after John’s own heart. Her poem, *The Summer Day*, fits the Gospel of John perfectly as in it she asks, ‘Who made the world?’ She reminds us how to observe the world prayerfully and finally confronts us with the question of all questions:

“Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?”

John asks us the very same question, and dedicates a lot of his gospel to telling us to stop if only-ing toward the past and squinting at the future, and to get a life in the present, today: an abundant one, marked by the eternal. Notice that nowhere does Jesus promise us that if we believe in him, we won’t die a physical death. Lazarus, newly restored to life, is still going to die someday. He isn’t immortal. What Jesus does is relativize death; it is no longer ultimate, our final, inevitable end.

Abundant, eternal life isn’t primarily about the length of our lives but rather the quality of our lives. It’s about living a certain kind of life, for however long that may last. William Sloan Coffin, longtime pastor of Riverside Church in New York, put it this way: “Deserted by his disciples, in agony on the Cross, barely thirty years old, Christ said, ‘It is finished.’ And thus ended the most complete life ever lived.”

Eternal life - or abundant life, or everlasting life, or resurrection life - whatever we want to call it, it's a life marked by fullness, joy, peace, generosity and love and can be lived right now. And that life will continue forever.

Death does not and cannot mess that up or interfere with it, because Jesus has victoriously wrenched that power away from it through his own death on the Cross and his resurrection life, three days later. God sent his only Son to the world, to all creation and all people, to offer us eternal, abundant, everlasting life. The whole world, and all people, not just some. That includes you and me. And still, there are people walking around us all the time who might as well be dead. I'm not speaking only of the especially horrifying people we read about or see on the news; I'm including ordinary people we know, too. They haven't taken hold of the abundant life readily available to them. This is what John is trying to say: there is living, and then there is living. Which kind of living are you doing?

In the end, Martha gets it and the reason Jesus waited becomes clear: "Yes Lord," she says, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." This is Martha's confession of faith.

Remember that at the beginning of this story, Jesus told his disciples: this sickness will not end in death, but in a revelation of God's glory in Christ, his Son. And that happens before Lazarus is raised.

The blurred line between the things of heaven and the things of earth in this story is not Lazarus being restored to life; it's the revelation of Christ with us in the present moment, showing Martha, showing us, how to live abundantly, eternally, here and now.

Martha calls Jesus by titles that reveal important things about him: Lord, Messiah, Son of God. She understands now who her friend Jesus is, and how that affects her life right then and there, bringing abundant, eternal life into her present, no more "if only-ing" at the past, no relying solely on the distant "if only" of the future. Martha even refers us back to the very beginning of this gospel, where John opens with the Christmas, creation-promise that Jesus is the true light, which enlightens everyone, the one coming into the world.

The rest of the story shows Lazarus being raised from death to give evidence of Jesus' divine authority over life and death, something Jesus told us about in the Scripture reading from John 10 we read last week, when he said that he would lay down his life in order to take it up again, by his own power. But Martha believes, she accepts that abundant, eternal life found in Christ's presence in the present, coming into the world, before the miracle happens.

And that is such an important part of who Jesus is: he is always the one coming into the world, every minute of every day, seeking us out. Every moment of every day is ripe with the promise of resurrection and life. Life in Christ is a heavenly and an earthly thing, and this familiar story of Martha's faith and Lazarus' rising, like our own stories, is not about death but life: how we get it, how we lose it, how we find it again; or better still, how we get found by it: abundant, eternal, everlasting. Thanks be to God. Amen.

*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel.* By Clark-Soles, Jaime. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

"The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver: [linked here](#)