



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

I am the Resurrection and the Life.

SCRIPTURE:
John 11:17-27

January 29, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

As I look over my life of worship, I think this particular service stands out as the most sad, the most depairing. The memorial service was for Michael, the youngest son of one of the staff members in our office. I had just started working for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), (the national church offices) in Louisville, Kentucky. Michael's mother, Karen, worked on our floor in another department and even though I did not know him and barely knew her, I went to the service, as did many of us from the office. The service was held in the backyard of a family friend because Michael had loved the outdoors.

There, we learned that Michael had battled the demons of depression and addiction much of his young life. At 22, he had taken his own life. To start the service, Michael's father talked about what Michael had taught him but he could not continue because of his grief. Then his mother got up and told stories about Michael. Then his sisters and some friends did the same. Many of them spoke through tears. It was very sad. Then a couple of Michael's friends played some songs on the guitar. To close, there was a lovely ritual where we were each given a small plant in hopes that we would take it home and plant it in memory of Michael.

And that was it. That was all. We learned on that afternoon that the family was not a family of faith—any faith. So they did what they could in this tender moment of unfathomable grief. They shared stories about Michael and cried. I remember sitting there thinking, “But, wait; that’s not all there is!” And while I believed that, they did not, which is what made this service so tragic and sad. Michael lived an all too brief life. When he died, the past, present and future went with him. And that was it. Death won. There was nothing else.

In today's scripture reading from the Gospel of John, sisters Mary and Martha are in the same place. All they can do is cry because their beloved brother Lazarus is dead.

By every indication, Jesus knew Lazarus, Mary, and Martha and loved them. Lazarus had taken ill and Mary and Martha had sent for Jesus. But it seems that Jesus did not come right away, or in any case, he came too late to help. It says that when Jesus arrived, Lazarus had already been dead four days—a crucial detail because in Jewish thinking at the time (and still today among many orthodox communities), the soul lingered around the body for three days. Jesus comes to Bethany, their hometown, on the fourth day when Lazarus is surely dead.

When Martha hears that Jesus is coming, she leaves the house to greet him, which is unusual because ritual laws require grieving family members to remain together in the home for seven days. When Martha greets Jesus, she says, “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.” Martha leaves the house and confronts Jesus with a complaint followed by a faith statement.

First, “Where have you been?” Our brother, your friend, Lazarus has been ill and has died, and we sent for you days ago. I know you loved him. He loved you. Why did you take so long to get here? And second, I know you can do things that no one else can do. I know you have a connection to God like no one I have ever known, including the high priests.

Jesus answers Martha with this cryptic statement, “Your brother will rise again.” And Martha does not understand. She says, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

It was a common belief among the Jewish faithful that when a person dies, they remain dead until a future time when the Messiah comes and all the dead

will be resurrected from their graves. That is what Martha means when she says Lazarus “will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Then Jesus says it. He says the fifth “I am” statement. Thus far, in this preaching series, we have explored four of his seven “I am” statements. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and all who believe in me will never be thirsty.” “I am the light of the world. All who follow me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” “I am the gate for the sheep. I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.” “I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and they know my voice.”

Now we come to the fifth “I am” statement. Jesus says, “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.”

Martha says, “I believe there will be a resurrection of the dead eventually in the future sometime.” And Jesus says, “Martha, I am the resurrection and life.”

Sadly, for Michael and his family, death was it. He lived an all too brief life and then it was over.

In the midst of Martha’s grief over her brother Lazarus, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Death does not have the last word. Yes, Lazarus your brother and my friend is dead. But death no longer wins because I am the resurrection and the life.

Not even Michael’s taking of his own life gets the last word. It was after his funeral that I was talking with one of our colleagues and she said how it was so sad about Michael because suicide was the unforgiveable sin. I turned to her and said, “What?” She repeated that the Bible said that suicide was the unforgiveable sin. I told her that was not true. In fact, scripture says the opposite. Inspired by God, the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:38-39, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The notion that suicide is unforgiveable is a lie because nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Death cannot. Life cannot. Things present. Things to come. Angels.

Rulers. Powers. Death no longer wins because Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life.

Jesus Christ stands in the face of death, even the death of Lazarus whom he loved and says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” because death no longer has the last word. Death does not win.

Yesterday, Rev. Sally Wright proclaimed that truth in the chapel for Bill Moffett. On Friday, I proclaimed that truth for Gloria Reed. On Tuesday, Rev. Tom Are proclaimed that truth for George Smith. All of them have joined the company of saints because Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in him, even though they die, will live. And whoever lives and believes in him will never die.

Ron passed peacefully in April of last year. He was 87 years old. As it became clear that he was not going to live much longer, he was asked if he was afraid of dying. He said, “no” because many years earlier, he had a sudden heart attack and for a few minutes, he died, but thankfully, he was resuscitated and brought back to life. He told Ann, his wife, and Susan, his daughter, and others that while he was gone, he had a distinct memory that he was at the best party ever. There was a great celebration going on.

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” Death no longer has the last word. There is a great party going on. And Ron is there. And so is Bill Moffett and Gloria Reed. And George Smith. Alice and Dick Nishioka are there. And my sister-in-law Vicki. And Michael is there, too.

Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. So death no longer wins. Death does not win in Monterey Park. Death does not win in Oakland or Half Moon Bay. Death does not win in Uvalde or Ukraine or Haiti. Death does not win in Memphis. Death no longer wins!

I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.