“Where, O Death, Is Thy Sting?”
John 11:1-45
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One of my wife’s favorite authors is Annie Dillard. In one of her stories Annie has a scene in which a family is sadly gathered at a grave to commit a loved one’s body to the earth. At one point the minister intones the familiar words from 1 Corinthians 15, “Where, O death, is thy sting?” Upon hearing that, one of the family members looks up. He scans the sorrowful faces of his family and sees all around him row upon row of headstones in the cemetery. And then he thinks to himself, “Where, O Death, is thy sting? Why, it’s just about everywhere, seeing as you asked!”

It’s just about everywhere, seeing as you asked. Indeed it is. Nothing makes headlines like when there are lots of deaths. An earthquake hits Haiti and in the span of a few seconds tens of thousands are gone. Our minds spin as a tsunami hits Asia and the loss is incomprehensible. After days of watching the count go up it stabilizes at the astounding figure of ¼ million snuffed out lives. It still hits us when an airliner goes down in the ocean and several hundred are lost. Yet those very publicized events can still seem impersonal and remote and maybe unreal. But all you have to do to see the reality of death is open up your morning newspaper. Have you ever opened up to the page with the Obituaries and seen: “None. There are no deaths to report.” Personally, I’d like to see that, at least once. As a minister, I’d love to go out of the funeral business because there were no more. Someday, yeah, we know that will be so, but for now I wait. Because for now, it’s never like that. There is always death to report. It’s just about everywhere, seeing as you asked.

Of course, death scares us. We’re all a mere heartbeat away from encountering death. We try to deny it. We love it when someone says, “You don’t look your age!” Advertisers know this and prey upon us. If you buy this make-up, you’ll look ten years younger! If you cover up that gray, you’ll be successful in the boardroom! You’ll have more confidence, make more money, attract a trophy wife, if you use this shampoo, buy this exercise machine, never mind that it resembles an ancient Chinese torture device, it doesn’t matter, merely possessing it will make you younger and more attractive! We do all this to deny what stalks us all: death. Birth, you know, leads to a terminal condition called life. When I was with my graduating class of Doctor of Ministry students at Pittsburgh, just before commencement, some were talking about going on to post-doctoral studies. Not
me. I said for me the D. Min. was a terminal degree. It got strangely quiet for a
group that makes it’s living talking. Finally, someone said they didn’t like the
sound of that, “a terminal degree.” Although almost all admitted it was a “terminal
degree” for them.

As Annie Dillard put it: It’s just about everywhere, seeing as you asked. John
11 is filled with it. It’s not just in the obvious place where Lazarus was buried.
You can smell it when John reminds us in verse 2 that Mary anointed Jesus with
perfume. Never mind that it doesn’t actually happen until the next chapter, so it’s
a little preview of death, because Jesus makes it plain that this anointing by Mary
was for his burial, for anointing his body. We see death hovering close by again
when Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus has died. And we see death close again
when Thomas invites the disciples to go to Bethany with Jesus and die because
they were expecting a lynching party to meet them, stirred up your friendly
neighborhood Pharisees. “Let’s all go and die with him!” he says.

It’s just about everywhere, seeing as you asked. Death seems especially real,
overwhelmingly powerful, even thick in the air as they arrive in Bethany. What do
they see and hear? Even outside the city you could hear the eerie cries of the
professional mourners. Underneath that almost spooky sound you could hear the
heavy heart-broken sobs of the close friends, and especially of Mary and Martha,
the sisters of Lazarus. When you are in the presence of heavy sorrow it is almost
like a weight on your shoulders. I can tell you pastors have felt it: in the hospital
room, in homes, at the funeral home, even at church. You feel it all around you,
heavy, a little suffocating. As professional as I try to be, there have been more
than a few times when I barely made it out to the car, or back to the privacy of my
office before the tears fell hard and I went home with a wet tie. Yes, I have a job
to do and words to say, but I’m human and lose it sometimes.

Where’s the sting of death? It’s just about everywhere, seeing as you asked. It
certainly was in Bethany that day. Who is the first one Jesus meets? Martha. She
probably remembers when Jesus corrected her for staying and working in the
kitchen too much. So she is right out there. Was she happy to see him? Maybe.
But there’s more than a twinge of anger in her voice, she is, afterall grieving. “It’s
about time you got here! If you came when we first sent for you, we wouldn’t be
having this funeral! You could have healed my brother, your good friend, with a
word, with a touch, like you did for a whole bunch of other people you hardly
knew! But you didn’t care to show up.”

Jesus reminds her of a promise that seems far off: “Your brother will rise
again,” he says. “Jesus, if I had wanted one of those pat little faith sayings I would
have went to the Lion and Lamb Bookstore and bought one of those plaques. Yes,
I know he will rise again at the last day “When the roll is called up yonder,” “In
the great by and by,” “When we all get to heaven,” but that doesn’t cut it right
now. My heart is broken, now. I want it fixed right now.” And then in that moment Jesus says it, the statement that changes it all. “Martha, look at me. I am the resurrection and the life. Right now. Today. This instant. Martha, I am that day that hangs out there like a promise that all people look forward too, but don’t really think is coming anytime soon. I am the embodiment of that promise, right now. Today. This instant. To Martha it doesn’t sound like a pat little faith saying anymore.

Martha struggles to believe, or how to believe such an amazing statement. Could it be? Jesus had never lied to her before. But how, how? Martha says, “Yes. Yes . . . I do believe that, because I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the future of the whole universe that has come into the world.” It was a bold thing for Jesus to say and it was a bolder thing for Martha to buy into. Even so, within just a few minutes, when Jesus sees Mary and then the others, he loses it. He didn’t make it back to the car or his office. He loses it. He weeps. He has a job to do and words to say, but he is not only fully divine, but he is fully human as well.

Jesus doesn’t weep because he doesn’t believe the amazing statement he just said. Jesus doesn’t weep because he’s lost sight of the fact his plan is to raise Lazarus from death and have tea with him later. Jesus weeps because as the Living Word of God, who was present when the stars and all creation were made, he knows how and why and through whom all things were made. Jesus knows very clearly that death was not a part of the original creation. Think about it. God did not say, “Let there be light” on that first day just to end up with a creation so fallen, so dark, so broken. Have you ever seen your kid come home from the playground or from school, and maybe be made fun of by others, so much that it just crushes his or her little spirit? If you could, you would in an instant take away all their pain and set it all right. Because you know this is not the way it’s supposed to be. Jesus weeps because he loves his creation and especially wants the crowning achievement of his creation: humanity, to flourish. Death was not in the original plan. Death is not how it’s supposed to be.

On this day in Bethany, where’s death? It’s obvious it’s just about everywhere, seeing as you asked. No one senses it more keenly than Jesus. It’s a dark day, a grim day, a day when it seems death has won and seems to be everywhere, Jesus does something at least for this one day to scare the socks off death, to leave death shaking in its shoes, to prove it does not have absolute power, as everyone thinks it does. Jesus knows, even if he raises him, Lazarus will die again. Mary and Martha may still have to go through another funeral for him at some point. It could be sooner than he knew because in the next chapter we read that the chief priests decided to murder Lazarus so as to cover over what Jesus had done. Lazarus’ second funeral may have come really very soon. But today when death is all
around, death does not have absolute power. It does not have the final say today. Jesus does. He raises Lazarus with a simple but powerful command: “Lazarus, come forth!” Exercoumai would be what he actually said. Doesn’t it sound like a command? “Come forth!” “Exercoumai!” Always one of my favorite New Testament words. Can you say it with me? “Exercoumai!” and the dead man breathes again, his brain synapsis start firing again, consciousness comes back again, and he is healed and restored, again with his sisters. It’s a piece of cake for the Lord of Life.

Anticlimactically, John ends the story there.

John, John, we modern folks want the post-game interviews. With a microphone stuck in her face, the reporter asks a breathless Martha, “Martha, when Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead, how did that make you feel?” “Mary, your brother is back from the dead! What are you going to do now, go to Disneyworld?” As the camera pans the gasping crowd of onlookers, so shocked they can’t cheer just yet. Doesn’t John know our need would be to see the leftover ham casserole and potato salad from Lazarus’ funeral luncheon turned into a “You Survived Death” party! The only description we have, is Jesus saying when Lazarus totters out to the entrance of the tomb, wrapped up and looking like the “Return of the Mummy,” “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” We can only imagine the unbelievable, exuberant joy that was present then with everyone. Everyone except a few.

Not everyone was happy. We make another big turn. We see Lazarus walking out into the sunlight, then we hear of a secret plot to kill Jesus. Why would the Pharisee want to kill him? Because if Jesus keeps this up, raising the dead, it will get very difficult to convince the populace that Jesus is just a two bit desert evangelist, no different than most. Jesus is a threat to the government like no other. He could raise his own army everyday, even if they had all been killed that day. Raising the dead is a pretty attention-getting behavior, so in a story twist so sudden it almost hurts-they plot to kill the life-giver. They thought, “We’ll stop these future resurrections by burying the one who does them.” Life was busting out like crocuses in the spring around Bethany. The Pharisees seek to bring everything back to normal to where death has the last word.

Really. It’s just about everywhere, seeing as you asked. And for now, despite the amazing spectacle of this gospel story, that remains our reality, too. And that would be the worst news wouldn’t it? Except for the promise from John 11:25. “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.” Jesus wasn’t just saying that to Martha. He’s saying that to all of us and to all who have even been on planet earth. “I am the resurrection and the life.” You either believe
those words or you don’t. Regardless of your belief, those words impact every last person who has ever lived, or ever will live.

It’s like if I said, “I have the cure for all types of malaria!” Unless you anticipate getting malaria, which would be very unlikely since you don’t live in a subtropical zone, but from which countless people die from every year, it really doesn’t impress you much. But if I said, “I have the cure for dying!” Suddenly, I’ve got everyone’s attention. If people believe that I have the cure for dying, I’ll have a massive crowd following me around the clock, wherever I go. Why? Because dying is something that impacts everyone we know, or will ever know, and it is personal as well.

The great theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, said that what happened on Easter was the future breaking into our collective past. The new life Jesus brought was quite literally our future, what God has in store for us, taking place at a distinct moment in history. We get a glimpse of what God has in store for us in the future, on Easter. We get a pre-glimpse of Easter and the future God has for us here at Bethany.

On our part, we still have to answer that question Martha was asked, “Do you believe this?” We don’t have to hesitate. We have an answer. We know. Yes, we do believe in Jesus and we do have faith that we will rise again one day. Why do we believe? Because in Jesus Christ it already did happen!

Nothing can stop, prevent, or even slow down the eternal life Jesus gives us. Why? Because it already has arrived! Jesus told Martha, that this eternal life which was to come, was here now, standing right in front of her. Remember George Allen, former coach of the Washington Redskins? When he was rebuilding the team he said, “The future is now!” As followers of the Resurrected One, we can say the same thing. The Resurrection for us is an accomplished fact.

I was reading one of my favorite pastor/authors the other day: Frederick Buechner who commented on this amazing passage and it peaked my interest. He pointed out that sometimes people who go through "near-death experiences" claim to not being completely happy that the doctors pulled them back from the edge of eternity. Many have said that they saw a bright figure standing in the light and that they wanted to approach that figure but were cut off when the heart defibrillator yanked them back to this world. For them it felt less like "near death" and more like "near life." That is so true.

Well, as Buechner imagined it, maybe that bright afternoon in Bethany when Lazarus emerged, blinking into the Palestine sunshine, only to see Jesus standing there in the light, maybe Lazarus was at first not sure which side of death he was on! Was he walking toward eternity or back toward earth? Some of you have seen the film Field of Dreams in which long dead baseball players somehow come back
to life to play on a mysterious baseball field that Kevin Costner’s character, Ray, had built right in the middle of an Iowa cornfield. When one player steps out onto the ball diamond, he says to Ray, "Is this heaven?" to which Ray replies, "No, it's Iowa." "Funny, it looked like heaven to me."

So also maybe Lazarus at first asked Jesus,

"Is this heaven?"

"No, it's Bethany."

But maybe it looked like heaven to Lazarus just because Jesus was there. Perhaps as much as anything that is the point of John 11: whether we live or die, we are the Lord's because he just is, right here, right now, the resurrection and the life. That will mean a lot “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder,” “In the Great By and By,” “When We All Get to Heaven.” But we know experiencing real Christian life and hope does not have to wait that long. It is right here. Right now. Because Jesus, the Resurrected One is right here. Right now. Every time we take communion, every time we pray, every time we read the scriptures, every time we work together, have coffee and cookies together, Jesus is there. Wow. Jesus AND cookies. Not bad. It’s kind of a taste of heaven already.

So, my friends, when people ask us, “Where can you find any hope in this world?” we can pass on the gospel message: “Where is hope? It’s just about everywhere, seeing as you asked.”