

Credo V – “I believe . . . in the resurrection of the body”

April 2, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A
(Part 5 of a Sermon Series)

Text: *“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?’”*

-- John 11:25-26, NRSV



(Above: “The Resurrection of Lazarus,” by Giotto di Bondone, 1304-1306, Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy)

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

Lent is a forty day season of reflection, repentance, and renewal – hard-work-days that seem to drag on and are about as pokey as the daffodils and forsythia seem to be this spring in coming out to stay. But if you do the math, forty days doesn’t quite get us to the close of Lent – ah! But we have to

remember to count in the Sundays, too! Every Sunday – even in Lent – is a day to remember with gladness the day of resurrection!

Sunday is also called the “eighth day of creation” for on this day, at dawn of the first day of the week, our Lord Jesus rose from the dead, thus making a whole new creation out of death; God’s act of re-creation that recasts all things in eternal lines of grace.

When the great cathedrals of Europe were starting to be built in the last days of the middle Ages the lines of each cathedral were constructed along a West-to-East axis. One entered from the West front into the Nave – a word from the Latin that is rooted in the word for “ship” (like an ark that is sailed on rough and stormy seas). This large expanse led to the crossing, typically adorned with towers in the North and South that led to the altar space in the east – where the table was set and communion was shared (even as our table is set this morning, too). The whole building forming the footprint of a cross that pointed east to the rising sun and the reminder that Christ arose as daylight dawned on that first Sunday long ago.

I have an old friend from seminary chapel choir days, Pastor Richard Allen Farmer, who always signed off on his letters this way: *“I’m glad the tomb is empty!”* That should be a watchword for us, too! A greeting that we can share when the days are long on penitence and short on patience; when suffering seems to shout down the good sense of salvation; when reflection and renewal seems more like rejection and ruination! Wiley Stephens, Pastor of Dunwoody United Methodist church, Dunwoody, Georgia has this to say about the story of Lazarus and Jesus:

“Our Gospel reminds us that Jesus still shows up and Jesus makes a difference. Our story is one about when Jesus intrudes into death and brings life. He will not be held off or jerked about by death. His strong voice brings life. Whenever and wherever it shadows our arrangements with death in all our defeats, our surrenders, our fears, Jesus brings a new strength by his very presence. The timing for an Easter story such as Lazarus coming forth from death seems all wrong. Shouldn't we wait until Easter? But the reality is we can't wait. Whenever Jesus shows up, the dead come to life. Things open up and there is Easter.”

Jesus makes so much of a difference that we are willing to make a dramatic affirmation like this: “*I believe in the resurrection of the body!*”

Yessir! I’m glad the tomb is empty, too! . . . The one that Jesus once occupied, not just the one he stood in front of and called into – and THAT is the critical difference.

To affirm the statement “*I believe in the resurrection of the body*” is to make a strong statement about the value of life. That our life is not only worth living in this life, but that we have eternal value; eternal worth . . . When Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus was dead, he wept, not simply for the loss of life, but for all those who wept that Lazarus was gone – the people who loved him, like Jesus, but who didn’t know that tombs could be emptied with a word.

To believe in the resurrection of the body is to affirm that life – with all its ups and downs, sadness and hurts, joys and sorrows, hopes outworn and dreams deferred is still worth living. To offer these words of the creed, attached as they are to the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of the saints AND the forgiveness of sins is to say that there is no-one that cannot be raised to new life; that no hope is outworn, nor dream dashed, as long as Jesus is the one who is standing out in front of the tomb and calling into it: “*Come out!*”

“We can live in a new way when we are both aware that he is with us and we can trust our very lives with his guidance. Bishop Will Willimon in his book “Resident Aliens: Life of the Christian Colony” wrote that this story demands an offensive rather than a defensive posture by the church. The world and all its resources, anguish, gifts, and groaning is God’s world, and God commands what God has created. Jesus Christ is the supreme act of divine intrusion into the world’s settled arrangement (my emphasis). In Christ, God refuses to stay in his place. We claim from this story the power of Jesus to call us out where we are buried, buried in our fears, our pain, our grief, our worries, life’s pressures.”ⁱⁱ

Did you hear that one sentence in particular? Jesus Christ is the supreme act of divine intrusion into the world’s settled arrangement . . . It is the key to the affirmation we make in saying, “*I believe in the resurrection of the body*” – the “Divine intrusion into the world’s settled argument” is that dead does not mean much when God is at work.

The settled argument is that dead is dead; like the words Charles Dickens used to describe Jacob Marley –

*“Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.
Mind! I don't mean to say that, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a doornail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a doornail.”ⁱⁱⁱ*

But the Divine intrusion says the wisdom of the ancestors has the prospective all wrong! The divine intrusion says that when the tomb is emptied from the inside out, then death itself is put to death . . . *O death, where is thy sting?”*

To affirm the belief in the resurrection of the body is to give assent to the belief that God loves life! *“God is a flesh and bones God”*, says Pastor Chuck Warnock.^{iv} We tend to over-spiritualize Jesus – that is what Martha is doing in the story from John's gospel in recounting the raising of Lazarus. She makes of Jesus' words a theological proof, but the Lord is trying to ground her in the very present moment!

What do you make of this statement in the living of your own life? Do you take Jesus' words and spiritualize them, too, like Martha? Be careful when you do that because you just might take them right out of the context of your present hard-scrapple life where they are meant to weep with you, and love you and live and work for you and with you day-by-day.

Do you wonder why the words “I believe in the resurrection of the dead” follows after belief in the forgiveness of sins? It is to announce the complete redemption guaranteed in the Lord Jesus Christ: that death does not have the final word. Jesus does.

There are many times in our lives when the crosses he asks us to carry in life weigh heavy – are they ever really light? When the dangers, toils and snares feel like so many pieces of ironmongery driven deep; when death takes loved ones too soon, when the path we have taken seems more of a

wilderness dark and deep, when another day seems too much like a Good Friday of crosses thrown up over our heads . . . Just then, in times and places like that, we find him extending his hands to pull us close to himself. He speaks a strong word to us if we’re willing to listen, *“I know, son . . . I know, daughter . . . It feels like Good Friday in your heart and in your life just now . . . I’ve been there, too . . . but I am here with you, come what may, and believe me when I tell you, Sunday is just around the corner.”*

Yes! I, too, am glad his tomb is empty!

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ The Rev. Dr. Wiley Stephens, *“Whenever Jesus Shows Up”*, a sermon preached on Day1 radio, http://day1.org/929-whenever_jesus_shows_up.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol.

^{iv} Chuck Warnock, “Confessions of a Small Church Pastor.”