

**Romans 14:7-9**  
**Fifth Sunday of Lent**

**John 11:1-45**

**March 26, 2023**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**A GOSPEL ITINERARY FOR LENT: THE TOMB**  
**“In Life and Death”**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Last week I watched a video of a graveside service in a very large cemetery in Dublin, Ireland. It was a beautiful day with blue skies and wispy clouds. Many friends and family were gathered around the open grave. In the background you can hear the strains of a bagpiper playing “Highland Cathedral.” Suddenly, the pipes stop and there is complete silence. As people are staring at the open grave, you hear a voice from the grave call, “Hello?” and the sound of someone knocking – knock, knock, knock. “Hello? Let me out! Hello? Hello? Let me out! It’s dark in here. Let me out! Can you hear me? I can hear you all. I’m in the box.” Knock, knock, knock. “Hello?”

Shay Bradley of Dublin, Ireland died in the fall of 2019 after a three-year battle with cancer. Apparently, he was quite a practical joker. About a year before he died, he had conspired with his oldest son to secretly record “the voice from the coffin.” Shay made Jonathan promise he wouldn’t tell the rest of the family until just before the graveside service. His daughter, Andrea, described the scene at the graveside: “People are gathered around the open grave, bagpipe music begins to play and then it stops. Next thing, people can hear dad saying ‘hello’ and a noise that sounded like someone knocking on the coffin. Everyone was in disbelief for a couple of seconds. For a moment, he had fooled everyone just like he wanted.”

After a couple of seconds the mourners caught on to Shay’s carefully planned prank - everyone except his sister Rose. Andrea said, “Everyone is laughing at this stage, except Rose. She’s shocked, she thinks the message is real. Then, the penny drops and she’s like ‘it’s a good thing he’s dead because I’d have killed him’. That reaction would have pleased him the most.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s a good practical joke, but there’s usually not much to laugh at when you’re standing by the grave of a loved one. Emotions are raw, bodies are exhausted, nerves are frayed, hopes are dashed, and the future can be scary. Shay Bradley may have given his family and friends a good laugh, but if he had actually climbed out of that empty grave, the video would have been quite different!

Today’s gospel story about Lazarus doesn’t recoil from the gritty and squeamish details of the grave and the reality of death. His sisters, Mary and Martha, are weeping, as are their friends and neighbors. Even Jesus joins in the weeping. Martha and Mary sound a bit perturbed with their friend Jesus – “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus tells them to roll away the stone, Martha protests (in King James English), “Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.”

Most unsettling of all, a man they knew for a fact had been dead walks out of the cave unattended, still wrapped up in his graveclothes. This story doesn't whitewash the sting and grief of death – nor does it downplay the surprise and consequences of Jesus's power over death.

When Nancy and I were pastors of the Littleton (NC) Presbyterian Church, we got to know the folks at Blaylock Funeral Home, just around the corner from the church. One day, one of the guys told us about working a funeral way back in the woods in Halifax County. He said the funeral lasted a *very* long time, because there were 10-12 preachers speaking, and each one of them tried to outpreach the other. The funeral home man said he finally had to sit down in the back pew because he got tired of standing up. The deceased woman was laid out in an open coffin. The last preacher, he said, kept leaning over the pulpit and commanding the dead woman, "In the name of Jesus, rise up!" He told us, "I decided right then and there, I didn't care how unprofessional it was, if she rose up from that coffin, I was running out the church door!"

Of course, he would! And we probably would, also! Because as much as we believe in Jesus, when we're standing at the graveside we're not expecting our loved one to open the coffin and climb out. Death is real. Death hurts us. Death feels so final. Death makes you weep. Which is why what Jesus tells Martha is so important. Think again about their conversation: Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I *am* the resurrection and the life." (John 11:23-25a)

I have officiated at 193 funerals and graveside services and have probably used Jesus's words in every one of them: "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." (John 11:25-26) That is our source of hope in living and in dying. When we gather in the sanctuary or stand by the graveside, we cling to that promise for the person whose life we are celebrating. But we also need to cling to Jesus' promise in and for our own lives. Martha believed her brother would rise again – "in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus offers Martha, Mary, the neighbors, and even us something far greater than even that hopeful promise – he offers us the beginnings of eternal life right here and now. Here's how one interpreter puts it: "As much as Jesus may be hurting for those who grieve, he realizes that he has something more than soothing words to offer those who mourn. Jesus stuns the crowd with the news that the life he offers is not just for the future; it begins now. Jesus has come to make this life abundant and to give us eternal life. Martha is not wrong. The future promise holds, but there is also a real promise for the here and now. The raising of Lazarus does not just pre-figure Easter; it is part of the Easter message itself. Resurrection life begins here in *this* life before it continues into the life to come. Not all of God's promises are delayed."<sup>2</sup>

You probably have heard the saying, "Funerals are for the living." Perhaps you don't know that the phrase comes from Roeliff Coe Brinkerhoff, a lawyer, editor, newspaper owner, and Union Army Colonel in the Civil War. He wrote, "Funerals are

for the living. If we have not done for the dead while they were yet in flesh, it is too late; let the matter pass at the grave. Day by day, we should live for those who are to die; and live so that we may die for those who are to live. Funerals are for the living."<sup>3</sup>

Colonel Brinkerhoff's thought reminds me of a powerful prayer in the *Book of Common Worship* that I often use in funerals, memorial services, and at gravesides. It says, in part, "O God, who gave us birth, help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It is said that what you believe about the future shapes how you live in the present. That is definitely true for us as believers in and followers of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Our hope for life after death – life after this life, if you will – isn't just reserved for the future, but is for the living of these days. Jesus told Martha, "I am the resurrection **and the life.**" Listen to what commentator Karoline Lewis says about that promise: "But Jesus, we might ask, what's the difference? Other ancient manuscripts omit 'and the life,' with the assumption that this phrase is a redundancy . . . Our first impressions may be the same. We tend to focus on the resurrection that we situate for ourselves as a distant promise, our guarantee of salvation, our eternal life with God and Jesus in heaven. But what might it mean that Jesus is the resurrection **and** the life? That we are raised to life, not as future salvific existence, but to life right now, right here, with Jesus? . . . It is here and now, because for the Gospel of John, it is not just the death of Jesus but the **life** of Jesus that brings about salvation. For the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, through which 'we have all received grace upon grace.' (John 1:16)"<sup>4</sup>

This gospel story about Jesus giving Lazarus life by raising him from the dead is sandwiched between two stories about death. Early in the story, Jesus gets a report from Mary and Martha, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Then Jesus told [his disciples] plainly, "Lazarus is dead." At the end of the story, word leaks to the Pharisees about what Jesus has done. Along with the chief priests, they debate, "What are we to do?" Caiaphas, the high priest for that year, lays out a plan, "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." (John 11:49) From that day on they planned to put Jesus to death. And, not only Jesus, but also poor Lazarus! "So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting him and were believing in Jesus." (John 12:10)

This story of life renewed comes in the midst of the ever-present reality and threat of death, much as we hear the promise of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life," in the midst of the constant presence of death in all of its many forms and its disruptions of life. For that reason, on this fifth Sunday of Lent, I tried to fashion our worship around the phrase, "In Life and Death," because it is in and for both life and death that we hear Jesus's promise, "I am the resurrection and the life."

So, we sing, "When we are living, it is in Christ Jesus, and when we're dying, it is in the Lord. Both in our living and in our dying, we belong to God; we belong to God,"

which is based on Romans 14:7-9 (my favorite scripture verses and my life motto), “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”

And those scripture verses are the basis for the opening words of “A Brief Statement of Faith” of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which we will use as today’s Affirmation of Faith: “In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.”

And that introduction echoes the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, published in 1563 to teach the faith and to comfort and inspire believers: “What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong — body and soul, in life and in death— to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

And, finally, that question/answer is the inspiration for the choir’s anthem, “Christ Our Hope in Life and Death” – “What is our hope in life and death? Christ alone, Christ alone. What is our only confidence? That our souls to him belong. Who holds our days within his hand? What comes, apart from his command? And what will keep us to the end? The love of Christ, in which we stand.” Three of the writers explain their motivations for the song:

Matt Boswell says, “The first line is what is our only hope in life and death? And what that question attempts to do from the very beginning is to cast all of our hope on Christ, from first to last, in life and in death.”

Keith Getty notes, “From a basic common sense it’s the one thing we can all be sure of. I don’t know if I’m going to be rich or bankrupt, fat or slim, have grandkids or not, live till I’m old. Nobody knows. The only thing we all know though is we are going to die and Christianity answers that question so directly.”

And Matt Papa affirms, “It’s important that our songs be more than merely joyful or exciting. To tie the joy and excitement to the fact that we overcome through death, we overcome through suffering, we overcome through all these things that’s really what hope is.”<sup>5</sup>

Yes, that’s really what hope is – Jesus is the resurrection **and** the life.

So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.

For in life and in death we belong to God.

***Let us pray: Almighty God, your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death. Breathe upon us the power of your Spirit, that we***

***may be raised to new life in Christ and serve you in righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Darragh Berry, “Sister of Dublin man Shay Bradley thought he was back from dead during viral 'funeral prank,’” October 14, 2019 at [www.dublinlive.ie](http://www.dublinlive.ie)

<sup>2</sup>Anne Robertson, “John 11:1-53,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, April 2004, Volume 58, Number 2, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup>Amy Wolkenhauer, “What Does 'Funerals Are for the Living' Mean?” April 25, 2022 at [www.joincake.com](http://www.joincake.com).

<sup>4</sup>Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on John 11:1-45,” March 9, 2008 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>5</sup>Abby Carpenter, “Behind The Song: Keith Getty And His Co-Writers Share The Heart Behind Their Song ‘Christ Our Hope In Life And Death,’” March 31, 2020 at [www.freeccm.com](http://www.freeccm.com).