

SUNDAY, APRIL 04, 2010

Easter Sunday 2010: Jesus, The Resurrection and Life

Jesus: The Resurrection and the Life
John 11: 25 – 26.

I. Introduction.

I had a birthday this week. On Friday, I turned the same age as my mother. We are both 39.

Do you want to guess what I did to observe my birthday? I buried our ten year old dog. Now, keep in mind what Friday was on the Christian calendar. It was Good Friday...The day Jesus died on the cross and was buried.

That sounds like a bad birthday. However, it reminded me of the day I turned 30. For some people, moving from the 20's to the 30's can be a traumatic experience. What did you do on your 30th birthday? I observed my 30th birthday by preaching a funeral!

I remember it very well. The man who died, Mr. Miles, was very well known in our small town and was a member of a small Methodist church. But his son was a member of our Baptist church. Before he died, Mr. Miles had been very active in the senior adult ministry of our Baptist church. We became good friends.

Mr. Miles died suddenly on a Friday. His son called me on Saturday and asked me to preach the funeral on Monday—my birthday. I met with the family on Sunday afternoon to plan out the service. While we were planning the service, both the son and the widow told me how much Mr. Miles loved me and would have chosen me to preach his funeral.

When I left the family home, I remember feeling very honored to be asked to preach this funeral. I had only known Mr. Miles for a couple of years. Yet, here I was being asked to speak about his life and to preach the Gospel at his funeral.

In fact, I was so honored by this opportunity that I spent the night before the funeral thinking about it. I was preaching Mr. Miles funeral after knowing him for only a couple of years. Who would preach my funeral? Who would I want to preach my funeral? Who would I want to sing at my funeral? What would I want my funeral service to look like?

That is when I realized...On the night before my 30th birthday, I was planning my own funeral!

How comfortable are you with talking about death? I suppose I have two scenarios in mind. On one hand, are you able to talk about your own death with your friends and family members? On the other hand, when someone close to you is facing the certainty of death, can you talk with them about it?

Sometimes we make matters worse for our loved ones when we are afraid of speaking about death. When a person knows that he or she is facing death, they often want to face it open and honestly. If we change the subject because we are afraid, we can actually create a real sense of loneliness and isolation.

I think we are afraid to talk about death, because we are afraid of death. Death is the great unknown for most of us. We have never experienced death firsthand. We know what we believe about death, but it is still unknown.

Some people are afraid of the pain of death. It will cause pain for our loved ones, and no one really knows if we will feel pain ourselves.

Other people are afraid of what comes after death. Will death be total annihilation and destruction? Or can the promises of Scripture be believed?

In John 11, we read a story about Jesus and a promise from Jesus. Both the story and the promise show us that Jesus has declared war on death.

Read John 11: 25 – 26.

These verses contain Jesus' promise to all who believe in him. Interestingly, the promise occurs almost exactly in the middle of the story.

John 11 begins with Jesus and his disciples about a day's journey away from Jerusalem. The religious leaders of Jerusalem had previously tried to stone Jesus for his claim to be the Son of God. But, John tells us that Jesus simply walked away unharmed, because it "was not yet his time."

Jesus was in control of his time. He knew that God had sent him to accomplish a specific purpose. He even tells us about his purpose. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus is the friend who demonstrates love in its greatest form, because "Greater love has no one than this that a man lay down his life for his friends." Jesus was sent for the purpose of laying down his life. However, this purpose was to be done on God's terms and on God's timetable...Not because human individuals or human institutions plotted to kill Jesus.

While Jesus and his disciples were away, they received word that Jesus' friend Lazarus was at the point of death. Now, this is important for at least a couple of reasons. On one hand, Lazarus lived in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem—the place where the political and religious leaders wanted Jesus dead. On the other hand, it sounds like an attempt to force Jesus into action.

Since Jesus loved Lazarus, we expect Jesus to do something. We know that Jesus has the power to heal the sick. We have read that in the Gospel of John and in the other Gospels. So, we expect Jesus to go to Bethany to heal his friend. But, that is not what Jesus did.

We also know that Jesus doesn't have to be present to heal the sick. The other Gospels tell stories about Jesus' healing the sick without being physically present. So, we expect Jesus to make a declaration and heal Lazarus from 20 miles away. But, that is not what Jesus did.

Instead, Jesus defied all logic. First, he remained where he was for two more days—waiting while Lazarus died. Second, Jesus went back to Bethany, where he could be found by the Jewish leaders.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, he met with Lazarus' sisters—Martha and Mary. He offers a word of comfort by saying, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Imagine how empty these words must have sounded to Martha and Mary. The resurrection had not yet taken place. Jesus had not been resurrected, and Lazarus had not been resurrected. But, Jesus is talking about resurrection. Martha

thought Jesus was referring to the Jewish hope in a final resurrection for those who were faithful.

This is where the story takes a turn. The one who claims to be the resurrection and the life asks to be led to the tomb of Lazarus. At the tomb, Jesus calls for the mourners to roll away the stone. Then, Jesus prays. After his prayer, Jesus calls in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And, he did.

Now, a resurrection has happened! The one who claimed to be the resurrection and the life has made good on his promise. Jesus has the power to bring life out of death. If Jesus has power over death, then perhaps we should listen to his promises.

That is exactly what half the crowd of mourners did. When they witnessed Jesus’ power over death, they believed Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God. Half of the people believed in Jesus and became his disciples.

Not everyone believed. The other half of the people ran to the religious and political leaders and told what Jesus had done. Almost immediately, the Jewish leaders launched a plot to kill Jesus.

It was now obvious that nothing is too difficult for Jesus. Jesus has healed the sick; cast out demons; made the lame to walk; opened the eyes of the blind; and now has raised the dead. Nothing is too difficult for the one who can raise the dead.

According to John’s Gospel, the resurrection of Lazarus was the “straw that broke the camel’s back.” This was the one event—the one miracle—that set in motion the series of events that led to Jesus’ crucifixion. Of course, the crucifixion was not the end of the story. Yes, Jesus died on the cross and was buried by his friends. But, the crucifixion led to the resurrection.

I think John wants us to see a connection between the story of Lazarus and the story of Jesus. Lazarus was placed in a tomb with a stone sealing the entrance. Before Lazarus was raised, the stone was rolled away. Lazarus’ dead body was wrapped in linen cloths. Before Lazarus walked into his new life, the grave clothes were left behind. This sounds like the story of Easter.

John makes a connection between Lazarus and Jesus. But, look again at John 11: 25 – 26: **“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’”** Jesus makes a connection between his resurrection and our resurrection.

Imagine what it would be like if Jesus had made this promise, but never rose again. If Jesus promised resurrection to those who believe but never rose again, then Jesus would be just another failed religious leader. Jesus would be simply another human who promised things he could not fulfill.

Now, imagine what it would be like if Jesus rose again, but never made this promise. If there were no promise that we would be resurrected, then Jesus’ resurrection would mean nothing. Well, it would mean something. It would mean that God has vindicated Jesus in the face of all his opponents. It would mean that God was on Jesus’ side and that all other religious teachers were false teachers. But it would not mean anything to you and me today.

Fortunately, neither of these is true. The truth is that Jesus died on the cross and rose again. AND, Jesus promised resurrection to everyone who believes in him.

The resurrection of Jesus has the power to change lives. Look at some of the lives that have been

changed by the resurrection...

II. Peter.

Before Jesus was crucified, Peter was a “larger than life disciple.” He had his moments of greatness. There was a time in Caesarea Philippi when Peter confessed Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” At that moment, Peter understood. But, Peter did not always understand.

Remember the story of Jesus’ walking on the water? Peter asked Jesus to let him walk out to him. Jesus invited Peter to get out of the boat. Peter walked on water as long as he looked to Jesus. But, when Peter noticed the waves and the depth of the water beneath him, he began to sink. He didn’t have faith.

Or remember the night before the crucifixion? Peter promised Jesus that even if all the disciples ran away from Jesus, Peter would hold steady. That’s not exactly what happened. Peter ran away, just like the others. Then, he was confronted by a slave girl; and Peter denied Jesus three times.

Before the crucifixion, Peter was courageous with his words and cowardly with his actions. But, the resurrection changed all this. Once Peter saw the risen Jesus, he became a great leader in the church and missionary outside the church. The Book of Acts tells us that Peter went to jail for preaching the resurrection. Church legend tells us that Peter was crucified for preaching the resurrection.

III. James.

Before Jesus was crucified, the Gospels tell us that James, the brother of Jesus, did not believe in his brother. In fact, it was just the opposite. James and his other brothers and sisters tried to get Jesus to quit preaching. Mark 3: 21 says that Jesus’ family tried to **“take charge of him for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’”** John 7: 5 says, **“For even his own brothers did not believe in him.”**

Then we read in the Book of Acts that James was present in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given to the church. We also read that James became the primary leader for the Christian church at Jerusalem.

Before the cross, James was NOT a disciple of Jesus. After the resurrection, James believed and gave his life for Jesus.

IV. The Reality of Resurrection.

The stories of Peter and James point to the reality of the resurrection. There is no other explanation for the change that took place.

Some people say that the church created the resurrection. I say, it is the other way around. The resurrection created the church. If the resurrection never happened, there would be no church...There would be no Christian faith.

V. Conclusion.

A wonderful part of the Easter story is not that resurrection is possible. It is that resurrection is impossible. We are here today, because God can do the impossible.

Why did you come to church today? Did you come because you were expected to come? Did you come to show your new Easter clothes? Did you come because it just what you do? Or, did you come because you truly believe Jesus is risen?

If you believe Jesus is risen, then you believe that God can do the impossible. There is nothing too difficult for the God that raises the dead. There is no person too sick for God to cure. There is no economic recession too deep for God to heal. There is no personal bankruptcy too severe for God to fix. There is no marriage too broken for God to restore. There is no sin too great for God to forgive.

The resurrection has the power to change lives.

And don't forget...Jesus said if you believe, you too can experience resurrection. The one who raised the dead...The one who himself came back from the dead...Promises eternal life to anyone who believes.

The resurrection has the power to change lives.