

I AM and you will be (18Mar18 – 5Lent)
John 11:6-8, 14-27, 32-50

Life and death, death vs. life. It's the defining struggle. And this is a crucial moment.

The narrative of Jesus' life obviously is accentuated as we get to Holy Week—from Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, to Good Friday and on into Easter—and we live in realtime through the final week of Jesus' life. Today's story happens not long before that, maybe just a few weeks before the end.

Yet it's halfway through the Gospel of John. That interesting note is not unusual to John, that half of the story of Jesus is this stuff right at the end. He lived for somewhere over three decades, but most of what we relate to are these final moments of his life.

John tells today's story as a crucial moment, a turning point, causing the lead-up to the end. This is the final major sign of Jesus, and is the final of the I AM statements we hear in our series, and it all points toward his death. But also, then, to life. Those two ends challenge each other intensely.

Let's start at the beginning and find our way forward, from death into life. The story started while Lazarus was ill but alive, with the detail that Jesus waited to go to him, two more days. He then arrived four days after Lazarus had already died.

In the story, this emphasizes that Jesus isn't working mere bits of resuscitation, putting a bandage on or a small cure. His healing is for wholeness. God's work is best made known, Jesus indicates, by him *not* being there in this case.

There's no reason to take that detail as more broadly applicable. It isn't that Jesus doesn't care about wellness in smaller ways. It's not that God refuses to help until things have gotten to be so bad that only a miracle would matter. It's not that Jesus ignores everybody in need, failing to show up for a few days. No, that's not God's normal practice or standard operating procedure, but just a revealing detail here to highlight the larger truth.

So Lazarus is dead.

Thomas rightly observes that going with Jesus back to Jerusalem will mean more death. By the

end of today, it's clearer than ever that that's what's in store for Jesus. But he goes anyway, goes to the sisters of the dead man (as Lazarus is called in the story, to reinforce the difficult fact).

With one sister, Jesus talks theology. They have a mini-Bible study to help her faith. She is able to look past the dreadful present circumstances toward something more, toward hope.

The other sister, not so much. She only weeps. Jesus doesn't try to lecture her or offer explanation, to whitewash over it and say everything will be okay. Instead, he weeps with her.

That's the kind of Jesus many of us first need in such moments, not a distracting from our grief but dwelling in it with us, in empathy. I try to practice that myself when I'm met with tears, not to explain away, but to reside in the sorrow with the person. It's not about right answers and certainly not just to cheer them up. It's recognizing the validity of sorrow, and sharing it.

Of course it can't end there, though. A Jesus who only was compassionate could be consoling but wouldn't offer anything to end the sadness. We need more from him, especially in the face of death.

So he continues to the tomb of the dead man and calls him out. The unbinding and letting him go isn't only about unhitching the fasteners on Lazarus' coffin, but is about freeing him for life, taking away the deadly confines so he may be released back to live fully and abundantly, as it's supposed to be.

In that way, the next time Lazarus appears in the story is at the family supper table, restored to his place with his sisters, to companionship and camaraderie, to the nourishing of life, to support each other.

If this were a fairy tale, we could arrive at that conclusion and say "they all lived happily ever after." The good guy faced overwhelming odds, but somehow saved the day. Death was vanquished. Loving relationships were restored.

But this is not a fairy tale. This is the reality of our world. Life was endangered. But death was

not the end. *But* life will not yet be the end, either. Lazarus is raised, brought back to life. And yet death will not give up so quickly. No sooner is Lazarus out of the grave than the authorities confirm their resolve to put Jesus into a grave. They argue it's better to have one man die. The logic of scapegoating abounds, but is never so finely tuned as it claims to be. Within a few verses, they'll have discovered that Lazarus is a popular attraction, so they'll also want to get rid of him, too. The cycle of violence can never be satisfied with one death, but keeps churning through more victims, and fails anyway to add authentic life for those who are caught up in it and perpetuate it. It's a vicious rhythm that needs to be broken.

So it stands that Jesus meets death with life while the world responds over and over by obstructing life with death.

Looking for other models around us of this perpetual pattern, I'd suggest not to presume to look outside as spring emerges. The back and forth of seasons can mischaracterize summer as life and winter as death. Since it's God's good creation, we should better see winter also as part of God's work for life, not a separation from it. Always in creation, God is striving to bring life from death, newness from where there was nothing.

We may look elsewhere for the meeting of life and death, where our creative God is bringing life from death, even while the world tries to counter with more deadliness and destruction.

In these weeks, probably a clearest portrait is in school classrooms, places of life, of learning, of growth. We should recognize God's work there, because caring and sharing of knowledge, discovering our place in the world, nurturing talents, assisting the little ones—this work of teachers and students is the work of God giving life.

We've witnessed again as that was countered with death, as a school for fostering life was met with bullets and all classrooms became filled with fear. Death trying to take the place of life.

But the students stood up on the side of life. We heard from our own young people last Sunday that this has gone on too long, that enough is enough, that it needs to change. Students paused Wednesday to grieve 17 deaths, and then walked out to demand that their lives be valued and supported. That is godly striving for life over death.

We'll see whether that specific struggle for life can be sustained, or whether it is squelched and death again tries to prevail as authorities ignore young people and discourage them, indirectly and directly harming their liveliness.

We notice the pattern in other places, that roads are for fostering our connections and vocations, but news of a bridge collapse brings death, and so godly striving would lead to improved infrastructure spending and well-studied engineers and safer streets.

Or that weather patterns provide for life on this globe, but hurricanes enflamed by climate change bring devastation, but God responds for life through noisy offerings for relief efforts and striving to mitigate the worst of global warming's disastrous effects.

Or I reflect on how 15 years ago I was an intern preaching against invading Iraq, that the "shock and awe" of our God isn't about violence against enemies but persistently and quietly and even now is for life and freedom.

Or this is also in gradual gains against nuclear threats; in the hope of North Korea talks, God works life over death.

Or God's work as protecting life-giving water sources and wetlands against perils from pollution or short-term profit.

Or in hard family conversations to talk through difficulties: that is God working through death for life.

We notice God's work for life over death even within our own bodies, of God's constant renewal in healing your injuries, in expanding your possibilities, continuing to create you anew within each cell and with every breath. It may seem as you age and feel decrepit and wearing out and await a looming funeral that death will have the

final word, but then especially we look to God's promise of life.

See, we may notice this struggle everywhere and always. But it's not in the individual cases of whether life can conquer death. We are all Lazarus and Jesus is always Jesus. So we trust the outcome, even though we somehow wind up acting like we don't know the end of the story. We pretend like there's still a question of whether godly life will finally be able to overcome death. Or we dismally forget and declare with news stories and our sad days that life has lost.

And this time of year in church may even tempt us that way further, to doubt by pretending we don't know the end. As the authorities threaten Jesus, we figure again the nastiest powers and biggest bullies will always get their way. Bittersweet Palm Sunday cheers a king who will be killed, executed before the week is out. Good Friday feels like the most emotional day of the church year. At Easter two weeks from now, we feign surprise at resurrection, (if it even matters,) as if we didn't expect Jesus to rise from the grave and thought death does rule and life might not win, that God had been beaten, that the victory was not for us.

But we know the end of this story. Like a favorite movie, we may still be moved as it continues on, still be swept up in the action. We know the struggle is real. We still take time to grieve together. We weep at death. But we also laugh in its face, because we know the end. We know Alleluias are waiting to burst forth. We know tears will be wiped away. We know it is not just Lazarus who will be restored, but all our relationships, all our fractured pains healed, all creation renewed.

"I AM the resurrection and the life"—yes, we know this, Jesus. You are always and fully life for us.

We trust it.

We remember it.

We celebrate it.

We already live, alive, freed from what would bind us, freed from what confines us, freed to live abundantly, ceaselessly, boldly with love.

We are called out from death.

And we keep living into it, now and forever.

Hymn: *The Word of God is Source and Seed* (ELW 506)