

“Life: New and Eternal”

John 11:17-27; Romans 6:1-4

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1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

Johnny Cash. I grew up with Johnny Cash. I listened to Johnny Cash 8-track tapes playing in my dad's 4-wheel drive truck. I spent a lot of time riding in that truck going somewhere, and working in my dad's shop, listening to the deep baritone-bass voice of Johnny Cash sing about “a burning ring of fire,” “the Folsom Prison blues,” and “walking the line, by keeping a close watch on this heart of mine.” The deep lines in the face of the man dressed black told the “back story” for the songs he sang: time in prison, addictions, struggles to make the right choices, and Christian hope. Cash was a man all too familiar with his weaknesses, while holding onto his Christian faith. He gave a real “face” to Paul's words in Romans 7: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:15, 24). Johnny Cash lived wrestling with sin, salvation, and eternal life.

Billy Sunday came to Sharon in the summer of 1908 for two months preaching about the ways of sin, salvation, and eternal life. Billy Sunday was a former Major League Baseball player turned revivalist preacher. His style and message was like Billy Graham with a dramatic “hellfire and damnation” edge. He drew thousands to his revivals in the early 20th C. The problem was sin, hell, and the devil. And answer was belief, heaven, and Jesus. Christian faith was all about heaven; believe in Jesus and go to heaven. Or reject Jesus and go to hell.

After Billy Sunday's revivals in Sharon, membership in local churches swelled. 1st Church, then in a building downtown, had to remodel so to accommodate the increased attendance. The message of Christian faith in that season was all about conversion and eternal life: eternal life to come, eternal life in heaven, eternal life with God.

And so it often seems that salvation and new life have been particularly defined as “believe in Jesus and go to heaven.” It's called by some as “the eternal insurance policy.” And that is true enough. Belief in Christ is about trusting the power and grace of God through death to eternal life.

But belief and going to heaven are not all there is to the Christian story. Christian faith is deeper, richer, and more dynamic than Billy Sunday's “hellfire and damnation” sermons. It's also about that eternal life that spills into new ways of life now. It's the way of life for which Johnny Cash was looking. It's what Paul wrote about in our reading from Romans 6: “Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so too we might **walk in newness of life...now.**” (Romans 6:4)

II. Scripture

Today we continue our fall sermon series on Jesus' "I AM" sayings in John. These sayings are 1st C Christian theological reflections on the nature of Jesus Christ and invitations to belief. With these sayings John is saying:

First, if you want to know what God is like, look to Jesus. "I AM" is the English translation of the Hebrew name of God, "Yahweh." So these statements are saying 'pay attention and believe,' because you're catching a glimpse of God.

Second, the plans, power, and person of God have come to creation in Jesus Christ. The long wait for God's Savior and God's kingdom is over. God's plan of salvation has begun in Jesus Christ. Now is the time.

The "I AM" saying today is perhaps the best known and the most powerful: "I AM the Resurrection and the Life." It is found in John 11 and part of the story of Jesus' miracle of raising Lazarus from death to life. In the story Jesus receives word from Martha that his friend Lazarus is seriously ill. The request is to come and heal him. But strangely Jesus does not go right away. Instead he waits a couple of days. And in the meantime Lazarus dies. It is only then that Jesus goes to Bethany when the community has gathered to grieve Lazarus' death.

Read John 11:17-27.

Then the story concludes. Jesus speaks with Lazarus' other sister, Mary. He goes to the tomb and asks that the stone be rolled away. He then speaks, "Lazarus come out," and Lazarus comes out of the tomb wrapped in the burial cloth of the dead. The once-dead Lazarus is saved from death to new life by the power of God in Jesus Christ.

III. Brief Exegesis

The story is often called "the resurrection of Lazarus." That's really not the best name for it. Resurrection is the transformation of our bodies into bodies for the new heaven and the new earth at the end of the age. Jesus' resurrection is the model; a body, but not like the body he had.

The story of Lazarus is more of a dramatic healing story. It's similar to the stories in Luke about Jesus raising back to life the widow's son in Nain (Lk. 7:11-17) and Jarius' daughter (Lk. 8:40-56). Those stories are about the power of Jesus to bring back to life those who have died. And so it is here with Lazarus. And so it also is that Lazarus would die again. This really isn't resurrection. So what is this story about? And what does it mean when Jesus says, "I AM the Resurrection and the Life?"

The first thing the story wants to say is that Lazarus was really dead. It was a common belief at that time that the soul of a person stayed near the body for three days and could revive the body. Here Lazarus has been dead 4 days. The soul has departed. The story is saying that he is really dead. And furthermore, the grieving ceremonies have begun. Jesus appeared in a time of death and grief. There is no maybe. Death is certain.

In a way it reminds me of the beginning of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*: "There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I'm about to tell." So we might say, "There is no doubt that Lazarus was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story John is about to tell."

The story also states the common belief in resurrection held by many people in Jesus' time. Martha states that belief and that hope: "I know my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." (John 11:24) As part of the creation, death comes to all. But in the power and plan of God there is resurrection on the last day. It is the hope and consolation Christians share with each other at death: death is not the end but rather resurrection and eternal life. It is the word spoken by the griever to each other and to Martha and Mary. It's what Martha speaks to Jesus. It's the word I speak at funerals: resurrection, eternal life, hope.

But it's here that the story takes an interesting turn. John is telling us that in Jesus Christ something in addition to the hope of resurrection is going on. In this story John is saying that the hope for new and eternal life begins to spill into this life now. "I AM...the Resurrection and the Life" Jesus says. And that new life in the new creation begins now. Belief in Jesus is more than hope through death. It's "resurrected" from the ways of sin to new ways of life now. And it's "resurrected" from death to eternal life later. It's both. It's all about the love and power of God in Jesus Christ for LIFE. Do you believe? DO...YOU...BELIEVE? And it's then that Martha gives the most complete statement of faith in the gospel of John: "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (John 11:27)

That's what this familiar story is all about: the same power of God that brings resurrection from death to eternal life at the end of age is also in Jesus Christ to bring new ways of life now. Eternal life to come, and new life now. Do you believe?

After a conversation with Lazarus' other sister Mary, Jesus goes to the tomb. The stone is rolled away from the entrance. There is concern about smell of decay and death. But the miracle happens; a man once dead comes out of the tomb alive.

It is a story about a great miracle: death to life. But it is also a story about more. It's a story about new life now. It's a story about:

Dead in sin, and then alive in new life;

Dead in brokenness, and then alive in healing;

Dead in guilt, and then alive in forgiveness;

Dead in all the mistakes we make in life, and then alive in second chances;

Dead in fear, and then alive in courage;

Dead in past hurts and disappointments, and then alive in hope;

Dead in selfishness, and then alive in love.

There are many types of deaths we can experience before we die. But in Jesus Christ the power of God brings new life now, a bit of heaven to our lives. Do you believe?

IV. Theological Reflection

There is an old story that goes like this. One Sunday morning the children's church teacher asked her class of preschoolers, "Who wants to go to heaven?" All the kids enthusiastically raised their hands, except one little boy, Joe. Surprised, the teacher asked, "Joe, don't you want to go to heaven?" "Sure," Joe said, "But my mom said to come right home after church."

Going to heaven. Yes, the Christian faith is about the hope of eternal life as we look through the mystery of death. It is about the power and promise of God seen in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's about new bodies for eternal life in the presence of the Holy God. It's about the restoration of relationships with those we love most. And with those we're not so sure about. Belief is about eternal life when all the broken parts of life are made right and true and good.

But belief is also about new life now. It's about coming out of the tomb of the many ways we are dead now. It's about the way of eternal life that spills into our lives now, so we live in different and better ways.

Billy Sunday's message here in the Shenango Valley was clear more than 100 years ago. It was: Believe in Jesus and go to heaven; or, turn away and go to hell. In the ways of God I trust that it was the message that needed to be shared in that day. And certainly the increase of people attending churches after Sunday's revivals did change lives. People lived better ways. There were many like Lazarus "who came out of the tomb."

"I AM the Resurrection and the Life" for new life now and eternal life later. I think about the stories of the people I know. A man with special needs grew up in an abusive home. He was filled with anger and anxiety. By chance he came to 1st Church years ago. The church became his family. And now the anger and anxiety do not dominate his life like they once did. Like Lazarus, he came out of the tomb.

"I AM the Resurrection and the Life." I think about the story of a long time member at 1st Church. Through most of her life she had been very active leading and sharing in missions and ministries at the church. Then her health began to erode. In time she couldn't lead anymore. And then she couldn't drive. And then she couldn't stay in her home. As her life diminished she struggled with grief and depression. But it was then that 1st Church members stepped up. Deacons brought flowers and communion. People visited and wrote notes. A few took her out to lunch. The nurses at the nursing home shared kindness. And when I visited I saw a change. Grief had given way to quiet joy and acceptance. Like Lazarus, she had come out of the tomb.

"I AM the Resurrection and the Life." I think about the ways 1st Church shares this new life in our community. I think about feeding kids through the Pantry Program. I think about the beauty of music last Sunday for the St. Andrew's service, and the beauty of music today. I think about the work of the Deacons and others who help with funeral meals, deliver flowers, and share communion with those who are shut in. And I think of our life together as a church, a way

of life filled with grace and acceptance and respect. It is all about a way of life together like Lazarus coming out of the tomb. And “heaven knows” today we need churches to live those stories of new life.

Johnny Cash kept looking for life. It was the great drama of Johnny Cash that many people watched. His son, John Carter, perhaps said it best in an NPR radio broadcast more than 10 years ago: “My dad’s life was a struggle between darkness and light, and in the end light won.” (NPR, Morning Edition, 10/29/13) Like many people, Johnny Cash lived his own “Lazarus story”; a struggle that gave way to life in the light, new life now and eternal life to come. ” I AM the Resurrection and the Life.” Amen.