I am with you before, during, beyond, and forever

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

John 11:1-45 ~ March 26, 2023

Lord, can these bones live? Only you know for sure. Breathe upon us. Raise us up to new life. Amen.

My Aunt Lisa died this past Monday morning. We were close. I love Aunt Lisa. She delighted that she should be my godmother – given that she didn’t believe much in Christ or the ways of the church. But she knew all there is to know of eternal life. Her son, my cousin Chris, died in a climbing accident at age twenty. Thanks to Aunt Lisa’s invocation, Chris was always present in our gatherings.

By any measure, hers was a good death. Age 89, still cogent, not in great pain, surrounded by her daughters. We spoke via zoom a few days before. She told me that the choral group she’d sung with for many years had just been there to sing for her. In a thin, reedy voice she sang the refrain, “I see the angels hovering around, around; the angels are hovering around.”

“Are you ready?” I asked. “Yes, Led, I am.” She was. She is.

Of course, death comes too often at an unknown hour and is not what anyone would call a good death. A tornado. A war. Shelly Gehshan is a parishioner whose death looms imminent after she suffered a stroke out of nowhere. It is risky to try and find meaning from death or from experiences that occur with no apparent logic. God knows, death can flatten us senseless.

Even so, death may awaken us to the poignant fragility of life, life now become more vivid. I am told by those with firsthand knowledge that to receive a fatal diagnosis changes your outlook; reorients your priorities. It is not hard to imagine that if we knew our end was near, it might open us in some way to be wider awake, to embrace the present moment with humility.

Jesus lived with this knowledge of his imminent death. We are not told when he first received the news. But we have record of when he first shared the news with others. Midway through his ministry, at age thirty-one or thirty-two, gathered with his disciples somewhere near Caesarea Philippi, he told them that, "the [Son of Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_of_man_%28Christianity%29) must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests; that he must be killed and after three days rise again".

Often, when we hear this story, our attention turns to the disciples – how they did or did not accept Jesus’ words or comprehend the implications. Let’s turn and sit for a moment with the knowledge that Jesus spent at least the final year of his life – if not many years – waking each day with unblinking clarity and awareness that his death was imminent. With that knowledge, he gave himself to love, to love with abandon. Jesus knew that life wasn’t about avoiding suffering. Jesus knew that he would die. Jesus also knew that death was not the end, that death would not be victorious. Jesus knew that he would rise from the dead to life eternal in the love of God. (And) Jesus knew that those around him – even those who loved him most – did not, could not… possibly understand or grasp this truth.

 Even though his own death and resurrection should make God’s victory of love plain once for all, Jesus knew most people wouldn’t get it. For the sake of the truth, he needed a good teaching moment. That moment came when Jesus received word that his dear friend Lazarus was dying.

 It’s no accident that this story of Lazarus’ resurrection occurs here now in Jesus’ day and ours – just before Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, just before we in the Church celebrate Holy Week and Easter. At times, Jesus addressed the crowds. So with us, on Easter day, we’ll be among the crowds – and our message will be adjusted accordingly. But at other times, Jesus gathered the inner circle, his close friends, to share himself with them. Today, that’s you and me. So lean in close, listen up, pay attention.

 Jesus’ pedagogical strategy is clear: his intention is to make a point with a select few. Jesus says, “this illness… is for God’s glory.” “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” “Father, I thank you for having heard me…. I have said this for the sake of [those] standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”

 So, if we’re the ones gathered now in this more intimate context before all the hoo-hah of Easter gets underway, what’s the message Jesus wants us to hear? His words… he said to Martha, “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.”

His message in word and action is just as we witness now in Bethany:

 I am with you. I am with you in this life.

 I am with you when you die, and as you die.

 I love you and will grieve your death with those who grieve.

 I will give you new life.

 I am with you. I am with you before, during, beyond, and forever.

 If death and fear cannot keep us apart from one another, nothing will separate us – ever, in this life or the next. Got it?

 I know that my own death will be a spectacle. The crowds will cheer and jeer, the crowds will weep and laugh, caught up in the intrigue and the commotion. People will make of my death what they will, interpret it every which way according to their own needs and agenda. Some will scoff, others will ooh and ahh in awe, bow down in holiness. Most will twist it around, miss the point altogether. That’s why I’ve come to Bethany beforehand, a few weeks before Easter. I need a few of you to see the truth, to hear the truth, to witness the truth.

 Because I know that we experience death, almost by definition, as senseless, incomprehensible. It takes our breath away. And resurrection? Completely outside the realm of our experience. We don’t know what to do with it, we don’t have a framework, context or language – so we can’t understand. Most people won’t understand Easter. They’ll be distracted by the lilies, the trumpets, the family dynamics, not to mention bunnies, eggs, and chocolates.

 So, now we’ve being taught, shown, beforehand: If or when you find yourself in this situation, this is what it means; this is what you are to do. If you start to skid, turn into the skid. If you are stopped by the police, keep your hands visible. If you see that my tomb is empty, you’ll know that I am risen. If you witness my brother’s death – and resurrection – here in Bethany, you may trust that when you witness your own brother’s death, he too is risen. You may trust that I am with you and I am with him, and that all shall be well. Let yourself be open to the spirit; open, undefended, attentive.

 All of the others, the crowds, the high priests, the governors, the whole lot of them, they do not know. They may come to believe in due time. So, it is with you, my chosen, my friends, that I am sharing these truths. So that you, when these things come to pass… it is up to you to teach others, to teach your friends, to teach your children and your children’s children: Nothing whatsoever can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus or separate us from one another. I am with you. I am with you before, during, beyond, and forever. To which there is really only one response, even in Lent. Say it with me: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!