

Title: The Hope of New Life  
Text: John 11:38-44; 25-26a  
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Immanuel Baptist Church  
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Maybe you heard about the florist who mixed up two orders on a busy day. One arrangement was to go to a new business just opening up and the other was to go to a funeral, but they got mixed up. The next day the guy with the new business stormed into the shop visibly upset, "What's the big idea? The flowers that arrived for our reception said, 'Rest in peace.'" The florist said, "Well, if you think that's bad you should have seen the people at the funeral that got the flowers that said, 'Good luck in your new location.'"

We tell stories about death I think in order to relieve our anxiety over it. Death is something we all dread and fear.

The story of Lazarus is a story about death, but the focus is not on death, the focus is on life. It's a story of how life emerges from death, how hope can win over despair.

When despair sets in it can be difficult to shake. It darkens all of life. It's kind of like watching television on an old black and white set. Despair affects the way we look at things. We tend to see everything from the perspective of a grayish gloom. It makes us suspicious about the future and negative regarding the present.

The Irish love to tell the story of Paddy McGarrity, who spent his life bemoaning all the circumstances of his life. Nothing satisfied him. But one particularly gracious summer day the sun burst out through the fog and rain of the country and spread over the Irish hills in a blaze of glory. Surely even Paddy would see the beauty of life in this! The parish priest called to him over the fence. "Ho, Paddy, isn't this a beautiful day!" "Ah, sure, Father," Paddy moaned, "but will it last?" Despair leads us to disparage the very beauty that stands in front of us and it causes us to ignore the very possibilities that could save us.

John tells us that Jesus loved this family, he loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus. The sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." When he received this news he didn't immediately rush off; he waits two days. John does not tell us why, but Jesus' reaction suggests that he was responding to God's agenda.

When he arrives at their home Lazarus is dead. The two sisters cannot help but express their disappointment and frustration. They both say to Jesus, "If you had been here, our brother would not have died." There is a tinge of blame hurled at Jesus I think. This is normal though. They are dealing with their initial shock and grief. We can expect anger

when our dreams are crushed, when we encounter unexpected loss, and when death invades our world.

But when we allow this hurt and anger to linger, when we allow negative thoughts and an attitude of regret and bitterness to settle in then we provide the soil for despair to take root and grow.

Philip Yancey, in his book *Soul Survivor* tells about wandering into a very informal kind of worship service in a beach town in California. That morning three women that had been in a small group together reading Henry Nouwen's book *Life of the Beloved* came prepared to share. The last woman to share was named Cathy. Her lip trembled and tears formed in the corners of her eyes when she stood up to tell her story. This is what she said,

"Most of you don't know my story. I was molested as a child. Then in college I was drugged and raped. I kept asking, "Why me? I had tried to be good. I went to church every week and all that. So I just gave up. I took to alcohol to cover the pain. Of course it just brought on more pain, so I drank more alcohol. I was on a spiral to nowhere, feeling old before I had finished being young. One day I stopped by my old church just to see what might have changed inside. In the empty building, without planning to at all, I began to pray. I started bawling like a baby."

"Not everything got resolved that day, of course. The pain did not go away. It was my brokenness that I was confronting in church, not my healing. But through Henry Nouwen I learned that suffering and joy can go together, that God can use everything in our lives, even the pain that never goes away. I learned to claim my brokenness"

"Am I glad these things happened to me? No. But I do realize they have helped make me the person I am today. I can be a true friend to others. I can offer a safe place for other people going through tough times."

She closed her talk with her own paraphrase of Luke 4, where Jesus walks into the synagogue at Nazareth, and says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted"

This woman went through a living death, a living "hell"—she had been victimized and broken. But she somehow learned to claim her brokenness, she found the courage to face it and accept it and in claiming it a ray of light broke through the darkness, the seed of hope took root and life sprang forth.

I don't know if life is even possible unless we somehow enter into our brokenness, enter into death. As Jesus approaches the scene he is met by Martha and he encounters her frustration and loss. Then when he faces Mary and experiences the depth of her grief and

the cries of those who had come to comfort her John says, “He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” The Greek expression here actually conveys a sense of anger. An anger expressed, no doubt, at the destructive and devastating power of death in our world.

In some ways Lazarus’ death and restoration prefigures and anticipates Jesus’ death and resurrection. This story connects us to the larger story of God’s involvement in our world. The central message of the Gospel of John is that the Word has become flesh, that God was present in a special way in the person of Jesus. So the pain and hurt and anger of Jesus is the pain and hurt and anger of God.

The God of Christian faith is not distant or aloof or indifferent; but our God is dynamically engaged in our suffering. God in Jesus has entered into the human condition even to the point of a cruel death by execution on a cross. So we are not alone in our pain and loss. God in Christ has come near to us, to share our death, to be with us, as the Psalmist says—when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And this gives us hope.

Jesus radiates hope from the outset of this story. When Jesus first received word about his friend’s sickness Jesus declared, “This sickness will not end in death.” What that means in the larger story, at a deeper level, is that death will not have the final word. Yes, death is part and parcel to the human condition, but death is not the end of the story. And John says in his introduction: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Jesus says, “This sickness will not end in death; this is for God’s glory.” The glory of God is the glory of life overshadowing and overcoming death. And remember that death is a powerful, religious symbol in this Gospel. Most of us encounter many little deaths in life, and some not so little, such as the death of a dream, or the death of a marriage or a significant relationship, or the death of a career.

When Jesus comes to the tomb he tells them to take away the stone, Martha says, “But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor.” Every death has its own kind of stench. But when Jesus steps into the picture out of the despair comes hope and life.

And there is no single way this happens, but rather life can spring up in a multitude of ways. Diana Eck is a Harvard professor and for sometime now she has been writing and lecturing on the religious diversity in America. She believes that people who have a very tidy view of Christianity, as if all the mysteries were solved, need to open their eyes again to what God is doing in the world.

One of the stories she likes to tell is about the Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Boston, in the suburb of Roslindale, where the magnificent image outside of the bodhisattva of compassion, named Quan Yen, was smashed by neighborhood vandals—boys in the

projects next door out of some kind of fear. In the course of deciding what to do when the vandals were caught, the Vietnamese Buddhists set an example of forgiveness for the whole city. They refused to bring the boys to court. They invited the entire neighborhood to a kind of festival of forgiveness. They had a picnic. They invited the vandals. They made them guardians of the temple. They basically displayed the kind of ethic of love and forgiveness that most Christian churches would cherish.

The boys went in and saw what happened in the temple, saw people at prayer. Diana talked to one of them whose name was Angelo. The president of the temple that very morning, when he welcomed Angelo and embraced him, had said, “Your name means angel, a guardian angel. We’re going to make you the guardian angel of the Vietnamese Buddhist temple.” When Diana talked to Angelo a little later, he said, “You know, if I had known any thing about what went on inside this temple and about these people, I would never have done this.” Out of death can come life.

Sometimes the stench of death is so bad, the gloom so thick, the clouds so dark that it is hard for us to find the courage to believe that somehow life can emerge out of death, that things can be different for us. It seems too much to hope for. But Jesus says to Martha as he says to all of us in our brokenness and defeat: “If you will believe, if you will have faith, you will see the glory of God.”

Jesus calls to Lazarus and he awakens; he comes out of the cave like tomb wrapped in his grave clothes. Jesus says to the faith community, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” Sometimes we need the help of others, the help of the faith community in shedding the wrappings of death, being loosed from the chains of guilt, self-doubt, depression, or despair.

And this usually is a process. Most of us keep going back to the cave and we usually have to be loosed from the grave clothes many times. For whatever reason choosing life is a struggle for us.

But what gives us strength and courage; what gives us hope to make new beginnings, to not give up, to keep faith and persevere is the claim of those who have gone before, the claim of those who found in Jesus a source of irresistible love, acceptance, courage, and grace.

For the living Christ is with us as he was with them and he comes to us now and says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes, anyone who trusts in my love and grace, even though they will die, they will discover the power to really live and the power of death will not prevail.”

Our Gracious God,

Let us not be disheartened by the power of death in our world and by the ways that power impacts our own lives. Let us not give in to gloom and defeat. Give us the courage to believe that in Christ you have overcome death, that your grace and presence are adequate for every need, that out of the many deaths we experience can blossom an abundance of life. Give us the faith and hope we so desperately need today, O God, to persevere and not despair; give us the faith to claim the living power of Christ to forgive and love and live well as your daughters and sons in the world.