

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008**

JESUS: THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

John 11:25-26

Have you ever gone to the ocean, fixed your eyes on the distant horizon and wondered what was out there? Maybe you've seen a bird or a ship in the distance. If you were out on the west coast, you may have watched the sun set on the Pacific. Well, for hundreds of years, Europeans gazed upon the western sea – the Atlantic Ocean – and watched the sun descend over the waters. They wondered if there was anything beyond the horizon.

Their experts told them that the world was flat. That if you go far enough, you would sail off the edge of the world. There was nothing out there at all. In fact, on the Spanish coat of arms was the motto, *Ne Plus Ultra*, "There is nothing beyond." That's what they believed.

Then one day, Christopher Columbus sailed off into that sunset. People waited expectantly, wondering what would happen. After a long time, he reappeared and announced that there was a land beyond the sea, riches greater than their dreams, a glorious paradise. The people rejoiced and the king of Spain changed the words to *Plus Ultra*, "There is more beyond."

D. James Kennedy compares this story to the resurrection. He said that for many centuries people stood beside the dark hole we call the grave and wondered: On the other side of the waters of death, is there anything beyond? Or is this all there is?

Then one day, he tells us, a great explorer went into the setting sun and descended into the blackness of the pit. He sailed off the edge of the world and crashed into hell. And on Easter morning, the Son of God stepped forth from a grave and declared, "There is something beyond." Into the great unknown of death, He boldly proclaims: *I am the resurrection and the life . . . whoever believes in me will never die.*

On this glorious Resurrection Day, let's try to understand what our Lord meant by these words. Let's learn about what is beyond the grave.

JESUS IS THE RESURRECTION AND LIFE

It is interesting that Jesus actually spoke His words as part of a conversation at a funeral. He was in a little village not far from Jerusalem called Bethany. He was there because His friends Martha and Mary had urged Him to come and heal their brother Lazarus. As followers of Jesus they had first-hand knowledge of His reputation as a healer and worker of miracles.

Jesus came, but He delayed His arrival for a couple of days. And now it was too late. By the time He got to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for 4 days. When He showed up, Martha melted in frustration. She felt that Jesus could have done something, if only He had gotten there sooner. He would have helped Lazarus and all would be well. Martha called out to Jesus and couldn't understand why He hadn't come when she asked!

How many times have you felt that way? You cry out to God, but the doctors only have bad news. You pray faithfully, but tragedy strikes. You ask Jesus over and over for simple blessings, but the road seems to be marked with suffering. Pain and trouble and death always seem to have the last word. . . Or do they?

In fact, it seems here that Jesus Himself was overcome with a sense of tragedy and disappointment. Down the page a bit we find the shortest verse in the Bible in verse 35: “Jesus wept.”

Here at the graveside, Jesus Himself shed tears over the death of His friend. Were they tears of compassion for Martha and Mary? Were they tears of sorrow because of His own loss? All this and more, I think. Twice in this passage we’re told that Jesus was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” Those words suggest not just sadness, but anger at what death had done. Jesus was provoked by the destruction that death brings when it invades human experience. He was angry at death and had come to this planet so that it would not have the last word.

Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus would rise again. He says so because He is the resurrection and the life. But that statement caught Martha off guard. You see, she didn’t expect that He would – or could – bring Lazarus back to life that day. Lazarus is dead – to the Jew, four days in the tomb meant that his spirit had departed and all hope was gone.

Now Martha knows Jesus, she knows of His power, she has heard His teaching and believes someday He will make things right. But this day, in the middle of this tragedy, she doesn’t want His distant promise. She wanted Jesus to heal her brother and He didn’t.

Maybe you are a little like Martha. Today, you get caught up in the celebration of Easter. The hope and promise of His resurrection is real, it is sure. But if you’re honest about it, what the resurrection means is something way out there, in the future. It seems like it has nothing to do with real life today. You see, daily existence, with laughter and pain, joyous celebrations and times of grief, often has no tangible connection to the Easter story. We believe that Jesus is able to do all that He says, but not now and not here. But that is not really belief!

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

When we talk about believing in the resurrection and the life, we have to understand death. Without the crucifixion, we would not have the resurrection. Without the illness and death of Lazarus, Jesus never would have called him out of his tomb.

Now some would say that death is simply a biological and a chemical problem: the heart stops beating, the lungs no longer provide oxygen to the brain, and neurons stop firing. The body quits and death is simply the end of existence. But the Bible describes death in a far more comprehensive way. Death is “separation.” Separation of our bodies from our spirits. To be human is to be both body and soul; we are both material and spiritual beings. When our spirit leaves our physical body, we experience death. Not an end to our existence, but a separation.

Death also involves the separation of people from one another. Someone who’s been a part of our lives is no longer with us. We speak of them as departed, having gone away and we feel a deep sense of loss, a separation. Any of you who have had a loved one pass away know exactly what I mean.

Death also involves separation from God. Separation in both a physical and spiritual sense. Adam and Eve were said to have experienced death immediately after they disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, but they lived in their physical bodies for hundreds of years. Isaiah 59:2 tells us: *“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.”*

The Bible says the consequence of our disobedience of God – the wages of our sin – is death. And that death comes in two ways . . . the grave that awaits us at the end of our days and our being disconnected from God even while we live. That’s why ours is such a crazy, often evil and painful world. Because in one way or another, all of us have sinned and so reap the result of separation from the life of God. Even though we live, we are dead.

But Jesus says if we believe in Him, even though we die, we can experience life. He is the resurrection and the life and He backs up what He says. Just after He spoke these words to Martha, He raised Lazarus from the dead. Called him out the tomb, grave clothes and all. A sure enough bona-fide resurrection.

And just a few days later, Jesus would ride into Jerusalem for the last time, face the agony of the cross and die . . . and then He would experience His own resurrection – on His own power – and forever conquer sin and death. He is the resurrection and the life!

Perhaps when Jesus spoke to Martha, who would have known the Old Testament, He wanted her to remember these words from the prophet Isaiah:

“He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; He will remove the disgrace of His people from all the earth” (Isaiah 25:8).

Jesus was claiming to be that sovereign Lord. The one and only who would have victory over death. Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. In the first words of this gospel, John wrote, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men* (John 1:1, 4). By saying He was the resurrection and the life, Jesus professed to be the living God.

Jesus spoke these words in a way that made His point clear. He called Himself “I Am,” a word that the ancient Hebrews translated as Yahweh or Jehovah and we translate in English as LORD. When He spoke to Martha, Jesus used the same name God used to identify Himself in the Old Testament. She would have understood what He meant.

Eight times in the gospel of John, He used this expression. These are what we call the “I Am” sayings of Jesus. Seven of those times, He added words to describe His divine character: “I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father but through Me.” “I am the resurrection and the life.” In each case, Jesus was making an undeniable claim to be the eternal Word, God who had come in the flesh. And in this claim, He met Martha at her deepest needs and brought comfort to her soul. And He brings it to ours.

Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Where He is present physically, there is physical life. And where He is spiritually present, there is spiritual life. Because He is both God and man, you and I can experience His resurrection both spiritually and physically – today as we put faith in Him and someday in heaven when we enjoy our resurrected bodies.

You see as Christians, we believe that this world is not all there is to our existence. There is something beyond that gives meaning to life. And that is real comfort. The resurrection is, for us who believe, the restoration of both body and spirit – not the old, mortal body, which turns to dust, but a new, glorified body, fit for life in heaven.

That's what the disciples saw on Easter morning. Jesus fit to ascend to heaven, to sit at the right hand of the Father. They could recognize Him, they could see and touch Him. He had a body like yours and mine. But He was also glorified in appearance, in an imperishable body shed of the pains and limitations of earthly existence. We are not completely sure what that means, but Scripture tells us that whatever that glorified existence will be, when He appears, we shall be like Him! (1 John 3:2)

So when Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life ... he who believes in me will live, even though he dies," He is announcing without hesitation His victory over all the pain and grief and separation that comes from death. He promises that even though believers will die physically, in the life to come we will be restored as whole persons. I don't know what you imagine eternity to be like, but it isn't drifting through the cosmos as a disembodied spirit or sitting on a cloud strumming harps or... We will enjoy individual, personal, human existence in a world that's very different, but very real.

VICTORY OVER DEATH

Now the New Testament has several images that give us a flavor for what this existence, what heaven will be like. I'll name a few.

First, Jesus compares heaven to a home. "*In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you*" (John 14:2). Going to heaven will be like going home, where we are comfortable and at ease, where there are friends, where everybody, especially Jesus, knows our name. When the Lord raised Lazarus from the dead, He called him by name. The resurrection means home.

A second image we find as Jesus hung on the Cross. He told the thief who was crucified beside Him, the one who cried out for mercy, "*today you will be with Me in paradise*" (Luke. 23:43). Paradise is an old Persian word which means "park or garden," a place in the desert with springs and grass and trees. Any of you who have been to a desert can picture the image of beauty, quiet, and rest. Jesus said that is what heaven will be like.

In another, the epistle to the Hebrews, heaven is called a better country. It is the Promised Land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the better place for all of us who join with them as aliens and strangers here on earth and wait patiently for the gracious and great reward in heaven.

And in Revelation 21, we read of the New Jerusalem with its beautiful streets of gold, gates of pearl, and walls covered with the most precious metals and stones of the day. Jewels so plentiful in the

heavenly city that they are used as pavement and building materials! And this city means security and community where we will have fellowship with God and with all those who have gone before us in the faith. No separation. No death. Heaven will be beautiful.

But Jesus points out that, though there is something beyond the grave, unless it is resurrection in relationship to Him, you don't want the experience. He tells us that there is both a resurrection of life and a resurrection of judgment (John 5:29). Beloved, not everyone will go to heaven. The Bible indicates clearly that after death we all continue in some existence. Some will have eternal life, some will have eternal judgment. That is the clear and uncompromising truth of the Scriptures.

There is an eternal place called Hell, made for Satan and all those who do not follow Christ. Revelation 20 tells us that the devil will be thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented day and night for ever and ever. The dead will be judged, too, and anyone whose name is not found in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire along with him. That is the resurrection of judgment.

But here at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus gives us hope. The message of the gospel is not fear, but love. What should be in sharp focus for us on this Easter morning, is that in Christ, death and judgment have lost their power.

The real mystery of our salvation is that the Son of God took on our human nature so that He could enter into the depths of humanity and conquer death by His divine power. Jesus knew that His death would destroy our death and His resurrection would gain our victory. He would later say, "Whoever lives by the power of my life shall never die." Friends, all who live by faith in Jesus Christ now have the resurrection power of Christ living in them. If we are united with Him and have His gift of eternal life, how could we ever truly die?

A few years after that first Easter, the apostle Paul wrote of the necessity of Christ's resurrection. He said that what was of first importance was that Christ died for our sins, He was buried, and that He rose again. Without that truth, nothing else really matters in the Christian faith.

Why? Because the resurrection deals with our separation from God. It is the victory over our physical and spiritual death. Paul wrote, "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). Jesus is our victory. He is the resurrection and the life!

WE MUST BELIEVE

Like many of you, I have been to funerals and have seen the heartbreak and anguish that death can cause. Every one of us waits the certain coming of death. So true . . . in the past couple of months, this congregation has seen several of our own friends and family pass out of this life. But only when faith is fastened upon the person of Jesus Christ, is there the hope of heaven. Only when we believe upon Him, can we face the certain coming of death with the confidence that what lies beyond the grave will be heaven.

I cannot overemphasize this. God calls us to life only through the death and resurrection of His Son. His promise of victory over death is for those who have a relationship with Him, people who have believed on Jesus and committed themselves to Him as Savior and Lord.

Eternal life is not something we are granted because we have tried our best; it is not something we earn through our church going, our good deeds, or our acts of kindness. The resurrection life we receive is a gift from God because we have the life of Christ.

Jesus asked Martha, “Do you believe this?” He wasn’t asking an academic question. He claimed to be the living God, not simply one who offered life but as the resurrection and life. A response to that kind of claim means complete trust in Him and in Him only.

So let me stop here and ask, “Do you believe like that?” If so, victory over death is yours. Heaven awaits you. If not, may I encourage you today to stop and come to Him? You can pray to Him like this right now:

Lord Jesus, I admit that I fall short of what you command. I am a sinner and can never earn the reward of heaven. I need You. Take me now, not on the basis of my own goodness (for I can never measure up to the holiness You require), but on the basis of Your death on the Cross for me. Forgive me of my sins and accept me as one of Your followers.

If you can pray that prayer and mean it, you can be sure that Jesus has already joined you to Himself. The resurrection life of Jesus is yours.

If sometime in the past, you have truly confessed your sins, repented of them and trusted in Jesus, you can be sure that you have already passed out of death into life. While you wait in your mortal body for your physical resurrection, your spiritual resurrection has already happened. The very spirit who brought Jesus out of the grave now gives eternal life to you and me. You can count on it! Listen to the words of John 5:24:

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

That’s a promise we can rely on! I close with this. On December 22, 1899, Dwight L. Moody, the famous evangelist of the 19th century, died in East Northfield, Massachusetts, the same small town in which he was born. Years before, he anticipated that moment and once said, “Some morning you will read in the papers that D. L. Moody of East Northfield is dead. But don't believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.....I was born in the flesh in 1837; I was born in the Spirit in 1856. That which is born of the flesh may die, but that which is born of the Spirit will live forever!”

What about you? Do you hope to be alive after you die? Are you comfortable with what is beyond the grave? Does Easter Sunday mean resurrection and life to you? The next hymn, has the words “Because He lives, I can face tomorrow?” Will you mean it when you sing? I hope so!