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“Rise Again!”

Read Sherman

Trinity-Anjou Pastoral Charge

Sunday, April 2, 2017

Scriptures: John 11:1-45 (The Message)

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be a witness, O God, to your Way of love, justice and faithful walking with us. Amen.

Ah, what a story this is! There’s something about the way the author of John puts it together that breathes life into the characters, with a little help from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrasing. It depicts a family, Mary and Martha, first trying to save their beloved brother Lazarus from almost certain death. No doubt they tried everything, called for every doctor, but nothing worked. Perhaps it was then they called for Jesus. If they couldn’t hope for a medical cure, then a spiritual cure would have to do.

But Jesus delays his departure. In my imagination, Mary is devastated by his failure to arrive in time. Her faith in him is shaken. Does Jesus really love her, her family? Did Jesus love Lazarus as she knew Lazarus loved, even worshipped him? As the house began to fill with mourners, some coming up from Jerusalem, you can imagine her heart breaking and her mood souring. It’s as if the favourite son couldn’t or wouldn’t make it home in time to see, if not save, his dying father. Sadly, this happens in real life. It’s painful for everyone. You don’t usually get second chances.

You don’t, usually. But John uses this story to make a point. There is nothing ordinary about his Jesus, who theologically for him is the same as the pre-existent Word that was with God before creation had even been born. Contained in this perfectly human skin is the very stuff of creation – the nexus of life and death and everything in between. John’s story line pits his Jesus, as we know, against the Jews, and we need to remember that Jesus, Martha, Mary, Lazarus, they were all Jews trying to live their religion, their faith in God, in a new, alive kind of way. John uses this story as if to set the stage for the final chapter in a book we know the ending of only too well. See what Jesus can do, he tells us. He can raise the dead! Even within ear-shot of the bigwigs in Jerusalem, both Jewish and we add, Roman as well, who want to discredit him, even kill him. So important is raising Lazarus in John’s story to exposing Jesus in all his, and God’s, glory, that the authorities will even go after Lazarus to silence him and his witness.

Do you believe that in God, we can experience 2nd chances? In our lives? In our deaths? This story begs the question. In the face of death, times when you experienced the same dashed

hopes as did Mary when something happened, something you dreaded and prayed to God, God, take this cup from me, from my loved one, but it happened anyway, did you discover signs of resurrection? Mary and Martha and all the crowds that day went from mourning to rejoicing! They experienced what John's Jesus came to reveal – that in him the resurrection and new life starts today, here and now. It is up to us to test out John's vision. Do I recall experiencing this reality? Do others I trust say they once were dead, but now are alive again, hopeful, grateful?

Stories like this happen. I want to share with you one such story, and I won't use names but some of you may be able to figure it out. It's the story of a man who, let's face it, was down in the dumps. Not young anymore, he lost his dear wife at the same time that he was experiencing major health problems and was hospitalized. Unable to go back home, he ended up in a long term care residence that could look after the body to some degree, but proved to be pretty tough on the soul. Life looked pretty bleak. But then, the man happened to meet a lady who also had had her share of tough times. A friendship blossomed, and suddenly life for this man took on new meaning. Their story is yet a new one, and so impossible to predict where it might take them. But from dashed hopes and no reason to live, to someone impatient to get on with the life he still hopes to live, this gentleman's life is rising again!

Yes, rise again, these stories tell us. Rise again, out of the ashes of your life, no matter what you have been through, no matter what you face ahead. It's a story and message we know Jesus lived and died and lived again to tell. And as Christians, as children of this living God, Jesus' story becomes our story to live and to tell as well. It is by hope in faith that we can be witnesses to a new rising, and seek to help others, to rise again too.

Mary may have questioned Jesus' love for her brother Lazarus, and his love for her and her sister Martha in those terrible moments of sickness and death. But what joy when she experienced her love come alive again - a love foreshadowing that of a living Christ that would transcend flesh and blood. That is a story we will get to tell soon, very soon. And even here in the middle of Lent, doesn't it just make you want to rise from your seat and celebrate God with bursts of Alleluias!? Amen.

(Play the song "Rise Again," by the artist Stan Rogers, from his album *Between the Breaks... Live!*, released 1979.)