

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
April 10, 2011, Fifth Week of Lent
“Who Do You Say I Am: Resurrection and the Life”
John 11:17-27, 43-44**

Every year my kids bring home their school pictures and I take a copy to church to put on my desk. It doesn't feel right to throw away the old photos, so I simply squeeze the latest image of Ian and Charlotte into the frame on top of the previous year's pictures. Sometimes I take out the small stack of pictures and flip through them, and I see how they've developed over the years. It's a good exercise, because it reminds me of the depth of my love for them. And since another school photo will be here before I know it, it also reminds me that my love for them has a future and will continue to develop for years to come.

By being here this morning, you have formed some image of who Jesus is for you. The hymns we've sung, the words we've prayed, have evoked some image of Jesus and that is part of your church worship experience this tenth day of April, 2011. But that image did not come out of thin air; it is built upon a foundation of lots of images of Jesus from life and from centuries past. Reflecting on the older images both reminds us of the depth of love we have for Jesus and opens us up to a future with Christ that is still to come.

For example, the earliest believers would say: Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. That is what the Samaritan woman said at the well; that is what Peter said by the shores of Lake Galilee. Next came a description of Jesus as Savior, the one to bring together Jews and Gentiles and offer healing for a broken world. That's the message of the apostle Paul, that Jesus Christ saves us from our sins and by grace makes us whole – individually and communally.

The Christian gospel then went from Jerusalem to ancient Greece, Turkey, and around the Mediterranean Sea. By the late 4th century, the Roman Empire had accepted Christianity as its official religion and over in North Africa, what is now modern Algeria (just west of Tunisia and Libya), lived St. Augustine. As Heather mentioned last week, Augustine's writing built on the earlier legacies of Jesus the Christ and Jesus the Savior to describe how Jesus was the Son of God – fully human, fully divine. Through Christ, a city of God had been built amidst the city of mankind; the kingdom of heaven was now revealed here amid the kingdoms of earth.

As more centuries elapsed, other aspects of Jesus' life were lifted up as a guide and source of strength. The image of Jesus who went off by himself to pray inspired people like St. Benedict, who in the sixth century established monasteries as places where people could step away from the world and devote themselves to worshiping God. During the hard years in the Middle Ages of war and plagues, some focused on Jesus the crucified Lord in order to be comforted in their times of trial; others focused on Jesus the Judge of the Final Days, as a way to make sense out of such widespread suffering.

But by the 15th and 16th centuries, a new image of Christ emerged. This was the period of the Renaissance, a name that comes from the Latin “rinascere”, which means to be born again. Remember when Nicodemus came to Jesus late one night and Jesus told him that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew (Jn 3:3)? The Renaissance was a period of resurrection in which new life began to bloom in wonderful glory throughout Europe. It was the time of artists like Da Vinci and Michelangelo. It was the Age of Discovery with explorers like Columbus, Da Gama, and Magellan. It was when the intellectual riches of Plato, Aristotle and even the early manuscripts of the Greek New Testament, having been kept safe by the Arabs in Constantinople, were rediscovered at long last. During the Renaissance, human beings were not lowly creatures destined to lead lives that were brutish, harsh, and short. Humans were seen as created in God’s image, now reborn through grace and reason and a literally resurrected spirit of confidence.

The Renaissance then led to the Reformation. Gutenberg’s printing press and Erasmus’ fresh translation of the New Testament meant that people could read the scriptures for themselves. Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the cathedral door on the eve of All Saints’ Day in 1517 and using Erasmus’ version of the New Testament he translated the bible into German in 1522. Authority was no longer limited to kings and princes and popes; reason, art, beauty, democracy, education were now part of life’s conversation. So when Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life,” that began to be heard, not as a statement about a future eternal life but a promise tied to this present, earthly life.

Think about the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in which Jesus first spoke that wonderful “I am” statement. Lazarus, Martha and Mary were good friends of Jesus. He would stay with them since they lived near to Jerusalem. And Jesus wept as he stood on the cemetery hillside and pictured his friend lying in the cave behind a great stone. When Martha stood beside him, their conversation moved from platitudes to profound faith. Martha greeted Jesus, just as we greet loved ones who gather for funerals. Jesus offered reassuring words: “Your brother will rise again.” Martha then lapsed into safe language associated with death. Just as we say things like, “At least she is no longer suffering” or “Now he is at peace and with loved ones in heaven”, Martha said, “I know that Lazarus will rise again, resurrected on the last day.” But Jesus moved from rhetoric to revelation: “Martha – hear me: 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.”

Remember what happened next. Jesus had them roll away the stone, even though the body had been in the tomb for four days. Jesus offered a prayer and then shouted, “Lazarus, come out!” Out stumbled Lazarus, moving awkwardly because his feet and hands were bound with grave cloths and a piece of fabric was still over his head. It is precisely at this point that we enter into this story.

Remember that we are flipping through pictures of Jesus through the centuries; we are considering the different titles given to our Lord. Building on the foundation of the Old Testament, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of God. To Paul and the early church,

Jesus is the Savior, the one bringing together Jew and Gentile. To Augustine, Jesus is the Son of God, fully human, fully divine. In the long Middle Ages, Jesus is the monk and priest who prays for us; the crucified Redeemer whose sacrifice saves us, the heavenly Judge whose righteousness challenges us. Then, in the Renaissance, Jesus is the one who said “You must be born anew. I am the resurrection.” And in the Reformation, Jesus says, “You are saved by my love and grace. I am life – not just in a future time of resurrection, but right now. Right here. You and you and you.”

Think closely about our bible story for today. After Jesus said, “Lazarus, come out,” the formerly dead man did not emerge in glowing perfection, like Superman bursting forth from a phone booth having entered it as the meek Clark Kent. Lazarus came out stumbling, bound, fragile. So Jesus’ next words were to the crowd of mourners – “Unbind him; let him go.” Life for Lazarus, like life for all of us, meant basic things like health, sight, food, movement. New life in Christ for the crowd and for all of us means things just as basic: Unbind those who are tied in grave cloths; release the captive; feed the hungry; visit the sick; walk beside the lame and infirm; offer hope and community and love to all.

John Calvin and the Reformers took this example to heart. For Calvin, Jesus is how we see God. Jesus is a mirror to God’s righteousness, goodness, wisdom and power. Looking at Jesus in that mirror means that we also see what is all around Jesus in that same mirror – a world created and called good; a potential society of peace and justice and righteousness. Think of it this way: If this world were totally corrupt and not worth saving, if we were to be indifferent to social justice and only pray for the New Heaven and New Earth, why resuscitate Lazarus? That’s why for us the world is a place where we to be active in the political and social realms means putting down our swords, cradling the wounded, clothing and educating and protecting the vulnerable. In short, here is where Christ calls out to us to unbind those bound up, for in that act both Lazarus and us are set free.

I don’t know what image of Jesus you brought to church today. I do know that Jesus is called by many names: Christ, Savior, Son of God, Lord of Lords, Lamb of God. I also know that the promises of faith are not limited to a life to come, platitudes spoken at times of death because we’re not sure what else can be said. Throughout history and to us today Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Those of us captive to poverty and despair, to soul-destroying busyness and pharmacological numbness, to self-doubt and hard times, addictions and anxiety, Jesus calls us to be unbound. And he also calls to us to unbind others. He calls to us to believe and know that he is the resurrection and the life – life eternal and life this very day. Thanks be to God.

AMEN