

Tracy Daub  
8/18/19--University Presbyterian Church  
John 11:17-26

## THE 'I AM' STATEMENTS: I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

There are millions of ways to die. Heart attack. Car accident. Cancer. Choking on food. Drowning. Stroke. Drug overdose. Airplane crash. Gun shot. Kidney disease. Meningitis.

There are millions of ways to die. And at some point, one of them will claim us.

But it isn't just our bodies that die. Our souls, our spirits, our psyches are also vulnerable to the millions of ways they can die. A divorce. The death of a child. Bullying. Sexual or physical abuse. Verbal abuse. The loss of a job. Estrangement from a child, or sibling, or parent. Bitterness. Self-absorption. Greed. Hatred. Rejection. Incarceration. Busy-ness. Shame. Fear. Grief. There are millions of ways we can die even while we are yet physically alive.

Death is very much at the forefront of our story today from John's gospel. There is the physical death of Jesus' beloved friend Lazarus. He has physically died. And there is also the emotional death of Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha, as they grapple with their overwhelming grief. Death has entered into this family and robbed every one of life. But into this context of death, Jesus comes speaking words about life. Jesus and Lazarus' sister Martha have entered into a conversation. After Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise again, Martha states, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." You see, resurrection was not a new idea. It was a concept that already existed in Judaism, but it was regarded as something that would take place far out in the future, when God would come to redeem the world. But Jesus says to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life." Resurrection is found in Jesus. New life is found in

Jesus. And resurrection is offered not as some far off future event but as a present day reality. And Jesus is the one who gives this new life.

This is the big theme throughout the Gospel of John: that Jesus is the one in whom we can know and find new life. This theme is found everywhere in John's gospel. At the beginning of the gospel, John states that "What has come into being in [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people." In that famous passage from John 3:16, we hear Jesus state, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Later in John's gospel, Jesus declares the reason he came into the world, stating: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10)

The resurrection of Lazarus further reveals Jesus' mission to grant us abundant life. And it is not just about the life we will know after death. Rather, it is clear that Jesus intends the abundant life to be a present reality. Lazarus does not have to wait until the resurrection at the end of time but is raised by Jesus to know new life in the present. In the face of death, Jesus offers new life now, to you and to me.

We like the part where Jesus talks about life, but we are not always so keen on facing the reality of death in our lives and in our hearts. But this miracle of new possibilities does not exist without death. The hope Jesus offers is not some kind of saccharine "don't worry, be happy" kind of wisdom. It isn't a Pollyanna hope that ignores the reality of the millions of kinds of deaths we face in our lives. Rather, the Christian faith offers hope because it faces the reality of death squarely and honestly and then instead of moving passed it, it moves through it. In other words, Jesus confronts death, our physical deaths as well as the millions of kinds of deaths we endure while we are living, he confronts these deaths with the miracle of life. The resurrection Jesus offers is not to be confused with *resuscitation*. Resuscitation merely brings someone back

to the life they once knew. But resuscitation doesn't bring newness. It brings more of the same. What Jesus offers with resurrection is a transformed life in the face of death. Death takes away. Death cannot create anything new. But God creates. Out of our deaths, God creates a new, transformed life.

If we can trust that God has got the resurrected life beyond this world taken care of, what we are confronted with then is this idea of resurrection as a present day reality. Jesus is offering us resurrection. Jesus is offering us abundant life now.

How? How does Jesus raise us to new life? How does Jesus offer us abundant life? I think it begins with two profound realities: that God loves us unconditionally and that God forgives us unconditionally. This love and this forgiveness work profound miracles in our lives. This love and forgiveness seeps into our bones and hearts and minds to bring healing. This love and forgiveness transforms our hearts and minds to inspire hope, compassion, and generosity. This love and forgiveness enters our being and moves us to care about others and to ensure that justice is done to them. And because of this unconditional love and forgiveness of us by the God of the universe, we ourselves will not only be raised to new life but can then join in God's work of resurrection around us. This is the new life found in Jesus. This is the new life that offers us hope. This is the new life that transforms us and our world. And we will know the truth of John's words: "What came into being in Jesus was life and the life was the light of all people."

Lately I have found myself growing discouraged by all the stories of death and darkness out there in the world. I imagine many of you feel the same. It is tempting to say: I don't want to hear anymore about the bad news of the world. But that would not be a faithful response. Remember, Jesus did not run from death but faced the death and darkness with the miracle of life. And thus, this is our calling as well. We are to be partners with Jesus in offering

resurrection and that means facing the death as well as the life. But sometimes, sometimes it can be hard to see the life Jesus offers because the deaths loom so big and so large.

So I have decided to collect "resurrection stories." We need to see and hear and remember the stories of resurrection--not so we can avoid the deaths all around us, but so that we can find hope in what God is doing in the world and find ways to join in God's work of resurrection. I am looking for stories about people whose faith inspires them to live out resurrection in their lives. And if you find such a story, I would love for you to share it with me.

Here is a resurrection story I found last week. It's about a congregation that is dying. Twinbrook Baptist Church in Rockville, MD has been a powerful witness of care and inclusion in its community. It offered care to children with autism, to students with lunch-money debt, to LGBTQ Christians seeking a safe place to worship. But as their membership numbers declined and the building costs mounted, the congregation was faced with the reality of its death. Instead of hanging on until they dwindled to extinction, the members faced their grief head-on and decided to make a meaningful impact while they still could. The first thing they did was to sell their building for less than the market rate to the Spanish-language Pentecostal church that had shared their building for 14 years. The members of Twinbrook Baptist wanted to ensure that the Pentecostal congregation could afford to buy the building. The pastor of the Pentecostal church called the ability to buy their own church building a "miracle." Then, the congregation of Twinbrook Baptist decided to donate more than \$1 million dollars of the proceeds to 35 local organizations for school lunch programs, medical clinics, LGBTQ youth programs, and other community initiatives. They solicited proposals from community organizations and then selected causes that reflected their values. One of the chosen organizations that provides housing and health care for people in need received \$250,000 and plans to use the money to open a

diabetic center for low-income and uninsured adults. Today is Twinbrook Baptist's last Sunday. After today, you could say that Twinbrook Baptist Church died like so many other mainline churches have done in recent years. And yet, as they died they looked to how they could be part of God's work of resurrection. New life emerged from the death.

"I am the resurrection and the life," says Jesus. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." We will face many deaths in the course of our lives. But we know, we know where to find lasting life.