



TOUCH POINT

Ollie, Ollie, Oxen Free – Touchpoint for March 22, 2023

John 11:1-48 (MSG) ¹⁻³ A man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. This was the same Mary who massaged the Lord's feet with aromatic oils and then wiped them with her hair. It was her brother Lazarus who was sick. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Master, the one you love so very much is sick." ⁴ When Jesus got the message, he said, "This sickness is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son."

⁵⁻⁷ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, but oddly, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed on where he was for two more days. After the two days, he said to his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." ⁸ They said, "Rabbi, you can't do that. The Jews are out to kill you, and you're going back?" ⁹⁻¹⁰ Jesus replied, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in daylight doesn't stumble because there's plenty of light from the sun. Walking at night, he might very well stumble because he can't see where he's going."

¹¹ He said these things, and then announced, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. I'm going to wake him up." ¹²⁻¹³ The disciples said, "Master, if he's gone to sleep, he'll get a good rest and wake up feeling fine." Jesus was talking about death, while his disciples thought he was talking about taking a nap. ¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Then Jesus became explicit: "Lazarus died. And I am glad for your sakes that I wasn't there. You're about to be given new grounds for believing. Now let's go to him." ¹⁶ That's when Thomas, the one called the Twin, said to his companions, "Come along. We might as well die with him."

¹⁷⁻²⁰ When Jesus finally got there, he found Lazarus already four days dead. Bethany was near Jerusalem, only a couple of miles away, and many of the Jews were visiting Martha and Mary, sympathizing with them over their brother. Martha heard Jesus was coming and went out to meet him. Mary remained in the house. ²¹ ²² Martha said, "Master, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you." ²³ Jesus said, "Your brother will be raised up." ²⁴ Martha replied, "I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time." ²⁵⁻²⁶ "You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ "Yes, Master. All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who comes into the world."

²⁸ After saying this, she went to her sister Mary and whispered in her ear, "The Teacher is here and is asking for you." ²⁹⁻³² The moment she heard that, she jumped up and ran out to him. Jesus had not yet entered the town but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When her sympathizing Jewish friends saw Mary run off, they followed her, thinking she was on her way to the tomb to weep there. Mary came to where Jesus was waiting and fell at his feet, saying, "Master, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ ³⁴ When Jesus saw her sobbing and the Jews with her sobbing, a deep anger welled up within him. He said, "Where did you put him?" ³⁴⁻³⁵ "Master, come and see," they said. Now Jesus wept.

³⁶ The Jews said, "Look how deeply he loved him." ³⁷ Others among them said, "Well, if he loved him so much, why didn't he do something to keep him from dying? After all, he opened the eyes of a blind man." ³⁸⁻³⁹ Then Jesus, the anger again welling up within him, arrived at the tomb. It was a simple cave in the hillside with a slab of stone laid against it. Jesus said, "Remove the stone." The sister of the dead man, Martha, said, "Master, by this time there's a stench. He's been dead four days!" ⁴⁰ Jesus looked her in the eye. "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

⁴¹⁻⁴² Then, to the others, “Go ahead, take away the stone.” They removed the stone. Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and prayed, “Father, I’m grateful that you have listened to me. I know you always do listen, but on account of this crowd standing here I’ve spoken so that they might believe that you sent me.” ⁴³⁻⁴⁴ Then he shouted, “Lazarus, come out!” And he came out, a cadaver, wrapped from head to toe, and with a kerchief over his face. Jesus told them, “Unwrap him and let him loose.”

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁸ That was a turning point for many of the Jews who were with Mary. They saw what Jesus did, and believed in him. But some went back to the Pharisees and told on Jesus. The high priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the Jewish ruling body. “What do we do now?” they asked. “This man keeps on doing things, creating God-signs. If we let him go on, pretty soon everyone will be believing in him and the Romans will come and remove what little power and privilege we still have.”

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

*“I am the Resurrection and the **LIFE.**”*

We have heard this line many times in our lives. But I wonder if we haven’t just heard the first half of it.

Do we make the same mistake as Martha, who knows that her brother will rise on the last day but fails to see the impact of Jesus on today, not just on a distant, future, other-worldly time?

“I know my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Which is true, but not the whole story.

And so, Jesus reminds her. *“I am, right now, Resurrection and **LIFE.**”* Life, here and now. Not just in some distant time.

John’s gospel has in its beginning chapter, these words:

*“The Word became flesh and **lived** among us.”*

We have wedded Jesus to the next life (“*I am the Resurrection*”), but how much have we wedded him to **this** life (“*and the Life*”)? We keep thinking the purpose of Christianity is to get us from ‘here to there,’ when the good news is that God has come here... so there is no ‘there’ to get to – to go to.

That is the point of the first sign in John’s gospel. The wedding of Cana is a sign of the celebration of the marriage of “the Word and the flesh” that now lives among us.

The Word became flesh – married flesh, wedded flesh.

And it is a time of celebration in the here and now, and not a time of purification and trying to get from ‘here to there.’ That is why the jars of purification are changed into the wine of celebration.

And so the Word comes into our lives to change them, transform them, resurrect them... just as water is changed, transformed, resurrected into wine.

Into the tombs of our lives... into the dead ends of our lives... into the Lazarus places of our lives... the Word comes, bringing new life.

It is all so earthly and here and now. As opposed to other-worldly and in the future.

And yet we so seem to miss it.

We turn this story into either a proof text on life after death or on our need to 'believe,' a word which is spoken numerous times in the passage but is another blind alley we go down... along with about 99% of the commentators on this passage.

So let me just speak to this mistaken idea of 'belief' as primary in our relationship to God, and not secondary.

If I believe I am saved by believing, then my belief is in my own belief, and not in God. If I believe I am saved by having faith, then my faith is in my faith, and not in God.

To have faith in God, or to believe in God, means that the answer to the common Christian question, "What must I do to be saved?" – the answer is: "That's up to God."

That's what it means to believe in God. That's what it means to have faith in God.

My belief is not in my own belief, and my faith is not in my own faith. My belief and faith are in God. Everything else is idolatry. Idolatry in my ability to believe. Idolatry in my own faith. With this kind of idolatry, I end up worshipping my belief. I end up worshipping my faith. Rather than the one who is Resurrection and who is Life.

This isn't a Walt Disney movie where, if you just believe hard enough, it will come true. Disney believes in your believing. But we are not Disneyans, we are Christians.

Jesus gives life in a situation where no one believes. No one believes Jesus is going to raise Lazarus from the dead. No one. Martha says she believes Jesus is the Messiah, but when he asks them to roll the stone away, she is the first one to object.

So, no one believes. NO ONE.

And yet, into the disbelief, Jesus comes and gives life. Jesus resurrects the unbelievers, as well as Lazarus, into a life of belief. And it is important to note that in John's gospel, 'belief' in Jesus is intimately tied to 'following' Jesus. To 'believe' is to 'follow.'

Therefore, belief cannot be primary in our relationship with God. It is secondary. It is what comes after God's activity in our lives. Following is not a primary act, or the first act. It is always secondary. You have to have something to follow in order to follow. You have to have something to believe in, in order to believe.

So, God's activity in our lives is not dependent on our belief. God's activity is primary, and belief follows, and life follows.

This is why Jesus says, in his prayer after the stone is rolled back, that he does this **"... so that they may believe that you sent me."** They didn't believe beforehand.

We're not like a dog I once had who would run outside and capture a lizard, and then bring it back in the house and drop it at my feet, and look at me as if to say, "See what I brought you! Have I now answered your question of 'Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy?'"

We don't run out and find belief or faith, and then run back to God and say, "See, see my belief! See my faith! Am I now a good boy or a good girl?"

We don't believe in order to be saved. We believe because we have experienced salvation, new life, resurrection, living the WAY in this one called Jesus – the Christ.

And so, Jesus resurrects us into a life of belief, here and now. Not just into something after death, but resurrected into life, here and now. A belief, here and now. A life of following, in the here and now.

And we follow him into the depths and despair of the human condition. Into the Lazarus places of our world, where we hide in our tombs... placing a stone between us and the world... shutting it out... seeing it only as a threat to our individual existence.

And it is there that we experience death.

Do we as Christians have something more to offer the world, other than a resurrection at some future date and time?

Is there a life to show them? A way of living to point them to? A life that enters into the darkness of others, rather than hides out from them?

*"I am, right now, Resurrection and **LIFE.**"*

It is interesting to note that in John's gospel, it is the raising of Lazarus that leads to Jesus' death. Not the cleansing of the moneychangers in the temple, like in the other gospels. It is Jesus' raising of Lazarus that leads to the plot to kill Jesus.

Or in other words, Lazarus has to come out of the tomb so Jesus can go in. Jesus is raising Lazarus to life, so that he (Jesus) can experience death.

When John says at the beginning of his gospel that, "The Word became flesh and lived among us," he could have also added, "...and died among us," though the rest of the gospel bears this out.

This is who God is. This is how the 'Word' lives among us. Not just rolling the stones of our tombs aside, but entering into our tombs and death itself, resurrecting us from the inside out. Calling the life that is within us to come out of its tomb. Out of our tombs of blame and hatred. Out of our tombs of individualism and isolation. Out of our tombs of fear of the other.

Do you remember playing 'Hide and Seek' when you were little? Do you remember when the game was over and some of the kids were still in hiding? And to let them know it was ok to come out, you would call out, "Ollie, Ollie, oxen free!" Now, I could never figure out who Ollie was and what he had to do with the game, much less his oxen. But then I looked up the origin of this phrase and it comes from the words, "All ye, All ye Outs – in Free."

"All you outs, in free."

That's the gospel, isn't it? All you outs, you're in FREE.

Our world has entombed itself. Hiding out in fear, placing blame, seeing the other as a threat, living outside of community.

Do we have something more to offer the world, other than a resurrection at some future date and time? Is there a life to show them? A way of living to point them to?

A life that enters into the darkness and tombs of others, rather than hides out from them...

*"I am, right now, Resurrection and **LIFE.**"*

Into the tombs of our lives, Jesus enters and cries out, *"All you outs, in free ... Come forth and live!"*

Lazarus, you and me ... along with Ollie and his oxen.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

Create in Me

(The Concordia Choir)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not the holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

See Him

(Keith Duke)

See him: 1) silent and lifeless, 2) alone and forlorn, 3) broken and helpless...crowned with a garland of thorns, 4) as son and as brother, 5) related to all, 6) through the grief of a mother...hurting the most of all, 7) as healer and teacher, 8) as helper and friend, 9) as prophet and preacher...

Ignore Him? I doubt if you can.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(“Our Father,” Taizé Reflections)

Benediction

Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace

(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.
Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.
Deep peace of Christ to you.