

Credo: I Believe in Forever

February 27, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

John 11:17-27

Well, folks, we have successfully done it. Today we are rounding out our 7-week-long conversation about the Apostles' Creed – an ancient statement of faith that we still use today to inform our everyday lives of faith. And every week we have joined together with the church across two millennia and affirmed the basics of what we believe.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. I believe that God created us, and is *still* at work creating us.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son, our Lord. I believe that God is a God of love, who demonstrated love in the most powerful and profound way imaginable: to come to earth as one of us.

I believe in the Holy Spirit – God within us, God continuously going about the work of moving us closer and closer to the heart and the life of God.

I believe in the holy catholic church. The church universal. The body of Christ that together works to shine God's light and love into all the world.

I believe in the communion of saints. I believe that God's people – past, present, and future, all join together with one another as one voice, in praise and service to God.

I believe in the forgiveness of sins – both my own and those of others. I believe that I am called to forgive, because I have first been forgiven.

And today, I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

And for this last one, we are turning to one of my favorite Bible stories of all time. Which you probably know by now, because this isn't the first time I have preached it. So, as is usually the case with just about everything we read in scripture, the passage that we read this morning is a small part of a much bigger story. The story of the raising of Lazarus.

But usually when we read this story, we get so distracted by the big thing that is going on – Jesus raising his dead friend back to life again – the big miracle of the story – that we miss some of the beauty and the power that is there in other parts of the story. So today, we are actually not going to focus on Lazarus at all. Instead, we are going to hang out for awhile with Jesus and Martha.

So, let's talk a little bit about Martha – who is she? And where does she come from?

Well, Martha is one of three siblings from the small town of Bethany. And she only appears in two of the four gospels (Luke and John). Matthew and Mark never really think to mention her.

In the gospel of Luke, the famous story relating to Martha is in chapter 10, when Martha and her sister Mary throw a dinner party for Jesus and his disciples, but Mary saddles Martha with all of the preparations and the cleanup, while she herself sits at Jesus' feet and enjoys his company. Martha is none too pleased, and so she pulls Jesus aside and whispers fiercely to him, "I'm drowning here in the kitchen, Jesus. Make my sister come help me," to which Jesus responds – as lovingly and soothingly as he can, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and concerned about many things. But right now? Your sister has chosen to concern herself with the thing that is more important. And I'm not going to take that away from her."

So right off the bat here, we learn that Martha is dutiful. Responsible. A hard worker. She takes her "role" in society seriously. She wants things to be done right. Of the three siblings – Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, I don't know what their birth order is, but Martha totally acts like the oldest child. Trying to organize everything and everyone and keep everything moving in proper order.

She's also not afraid of Jesus. And not afraid to speak up when there is something wrong. Or to ask for what she wants or feels like she needs. She will snap at Jesus, if she feels like that is warranted. She will try to order *him* around. So, either she is just a really blunt, outgoing person who wears all of her emotions on her sleeve, or she has a deeper relationship with Jesus than the story really lets on – the kind of relationship that would allow her to say things to him that she might not say to just any other guest.

And in John's gospel we start to get the sense that maybe it is the second one. John is really interesting, because of all of the gospel writers, John is the one who is the most focused on the theme of love.

"For God so *loved* the world that he gave his one and only son..."

"Beloved, let us *love* one another, because love is from God..."

"This is my commandment, that you *love* one another as I have loved you..."

But even though John throws around this theme of love, over and over and over and over again, just about every chance he gets, there are only four individuals in John's gospel who John singles out, by name, as people Jesus "loved." Now, that's not to say that Jesus didn't love everybody. Of course he did. But there were a few people with whom Jesus had a particularly close relationship. "Best friends," if you will. First, we had John himself – he refers to himself as "the disciple Jesus loved." And then also, we have the three siblings: Martha and Mary and Lazarus.

So when our story today takes place, Lazarus has gotten sick and died. And even though Jesus had known that Lazarus was sick, he took his sweet time getting to Bethany until it was too late, and understandably the sisters were upset. Because they knew Jesus. Probably better than just about anyone. And they knew that if Jesus had been there, he would have healed Lazarus in an instant. But he wasn't there, and so, their brother was now dead.

And so when Jesus finally does show up, four days later during the wake, Martha – being the outgoing, holds-nothing-back, tells-it-like-it-is, bound-by-duty-and-responsibility person that she is, runs out of the house to meet him on the road before he ever gets to the house. And she reems him out. Rakes him over the coals. Starts yelling at him about how he knew that Lazarus was sick, and he should have been here, and it's all his fault that he died.

And then we get into this exchange between the two of them – which is where I would like to camp out for a little while. Because it has everything to do with our line from the Creed for today: I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

So when Jesus and Martha are standing out there on the road, Jesus is just basically standing there, listening, while Martha lets off all of her steam. She throws around her accusations; she goes through at least two of the stages of grief right then and there. Anger. Check. All of her anger right now is directed at Jesus. And bargaining. “I know that even right now God will give you whatever you ask.”

And then when Martha finally takes her first deep breath, that's when Jesus steps in: “Your brother will rise again.”

Now, I don't know how many of you have ever lost a loved one. But I'm guessing, it is most of us, at some time or another. And in those first few minutes, hours, days, even weeks after the loss, a lot of people try to say a lot of comforting things. But more often than not, those well-intentioned words come out sounding pretty hollow. I know that after I had a miscarriage, I heard all kinds of things – from people who really deeply loved me and who just wanted to make me feel better. Things like, “just trust God. He knows what he's doing.” Or, “God knew that this just wasn't the right time for you.” Or “everything happens for a reason,” or “you're young – you can always try again.”

And the part of me that was grieving and just wanted my baby back wanted to punch every one of these people.

And I can imagine Martha feeling the same thing. “That's not helpful, Jesus. I know that Lazarus will rise again, in the resurrection, on the last day. I know that this isn't the end for him. I know that there is something bigger to come. But that doesn't help me right now. Because right now, I just want my brother back.”

So just to unpack this a little bit, in traditional Rabbinic Judaism – the kind of Judaism that was most widely-practiced during that day and time, and the kind of Judaism to which Mary and Martha and Lazarus and even Jesus himself would have belonged, they held to a belief in resurrection that essentially held (similarly to Christian belief) that when a person dies, that person's soul goes to be with God, and the physical body stays

here on earth. But that when the Messiah comes, the dead will receive their resurrected bodies, as God establishes the kingdom of God here on earth.

“Yes, Jesus, I believe in resurrection,” Martha tells Jesus. “I believe that one day I will see Lazarus again. I believe in life after death. I believe in forever. But I’m still mad at you.”

But then Jesus continues. “*I am* the resurrection and the life.”

This isn’t just some empty platitude, meant to make a grieving sister feel better.” Don’t cry, Martha, you know you’ll see him again in heaven.”

No, this was different. This was immediate. “Martha, you know that kingdom of God that you have been waiting for? That Messiah that you have been looking for, for hundreds and hundreds of years? You know that time “in the end” that you say you believe in, when the dead will rise and God will come to earth? Martha, that time is **now.**” And *I* am the one you have been searching for. Do you believe it?

And Martha stops in her tracks. And she puts her fists down. Because all of a sudden, that urge to punch Jesus seems to have passed. And a lightbulb goes on inside her soul. What if what Jesus says is true? What if Jesus really is the one I have been waiting for? What if the resurrection of the dead really is happening? What if the boundaries between earth and heaven really are breaking apart? And what if the dead really will rise again – not maybe sometime a long time from now in the last days...but *now*? What if *right now* really is the *start* of eternal life – and it just keeps getting better and better from here on out?

“Yes, Jesus,” Martha finally says. “I believe that what you say is true. I believe that you are the Messiah. I believe that you are the Son of God. I believe that you are the one coming into the world.”

Interestingly, Jesus never said *any* of those things. He never told Martha he was the Messiah. He never told her he was the Son of God. But as Martha stood here in his presence, listening to him talk about resurrection – something in her soul shifted, enough that she finally recognized him for who he truly was. This wasn’t just Martha saying “okay, yeah, yeah, Jesus, I believe you” while not really listening to him. This was Martha saying, “I’ve known you for forever, but now, for the first time I really *see* you.”

Which begs the question for us: When we come face-to-face with Jesus; when we experience the presence of the living God working within us, what is it that *we* expect? When we say “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,” what do we really mean when we say that?

Is that our way of saying that we believe in life after death? That we believe in eternity spent with God? That we believe that this life is not all there is? If so, great. That is a

great belief, and that belief will sustain us through this life and to the other side of the grave.

But I would say that this conversation that Jesus has with Martha invites us to something that is even bigger and better than that. Because if Jesus's words to Martha are true, then resurrection and everlasting life are not something that exist only "sometime in the future." Only after we die. These things are *now*.

Life beyond death; chains being broken; prisoners being set free; *us* being set free from the things that hold us captive? That's not a maybe someday promise. That is what Jesus came to establish, here and now. That is something that we have the ability to live, today. Jesus is calling us out of our graves, today. Jesus is calling us to live lives of peace, today. Even in a world that is torn apart by war and division, God calls us out of the grave to carve another way forward. Jesus is calling us to live lives of love, today. *Especially* today, when love seems in such short supply. Jesus is calling us to see beyond the brokenness and pain and sin and darkness that can sometimes envelop our world, and to live lives of hope and joy and kindness and truth. Today.

To live the kingdom of God, as if it is happening right now.
Because for us, it is. Jesus has already called us out of our graves, and into new life. Into resurrected life. Into the hope of eternity.

And so my friends, eternity starts today. May our lives be lives that reflect the new life that God has created for us, right here and right now.