



**"Do You Believe?"**

**Scripture – John 11:17-44**

**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**

**Sunday, August 22, 2021**

"I AM" Sermon Series:

*If four artists were to paint the same model, they would create four unique portraits. Their works would differ based on perspective, personal style, or simply the play of the light. In the same way, the four Gospel writers create four unique portraits of Jesus the Messiah. One way John paints his portrait is through metaphor — comparing Christ to images that would be familiar to the Gospel's original audience: bread, light, shepherd, vine. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus likens himself to various objects and concepts through statements that always begin the same way: "I am ..." During Dr. Jones' sabbatical, the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson — along with the Rev. Jill Getty and the Rev. Dr. Tracy Keenan — will explore the seven "I AM" statements of John's Gospel and the ways they contribute to a unique portrait of the Messiah who dwells among us.*

*"Do You Believe?" which focuses on the statement, "I am the Resurrection and Life," is the fifth sermon in the series.*

In the first season finale of *Ted Lasso*, the Richmond Football Club is facing relegation. Now, this series is set in England, so the football club is what we would call a soccer team. And relegation is demotion; if the club loses the final match, it will get demoted to a less competitive league. As if the prospect of relegation wasn't bad enough, the Richmond Greyhounds are up against the reigning champs. Barring a miracle, they have no chance of winning. Before the final match the players file into the locker room. Morale is low. In fact, a pall of despair hangs over the team. They've already resigned themselves to defeat. Although the players go through the motions of their pre-game rituals — reciting their prayers, rehearsing their superstitions — they've already given up hope. You can see it on their faces; it's hopeless.

The scene tugs at the heart because we understand the despondency that permeates that locker room. Even if you're not the sort to invest any emotion in the outcome of a football match; even if you think sports are over-rated and trivial, you can recognize the defeat etched on the players' faces. It's a version of the hopelessness that traps too many people in too many places, for far more devastating reasons. Lord knows there is no shortage of desperation in our world; we've seen plenty of it on the news this week, alone. As the Richmond Greyhounds wait for the match that will seal their fate, their manager comes into the room. Now, Ted Lasso knows nothing about soccer. He's actually an American Football Coach who's been brought in to manage the club, much to the

dismay of the Richmond faithful. But Ted Lasso does know a thing or two about life. He begins his pre-game speech:

*I've been hearing this phrase you all got over here that I ain't too crazy about: "It's the hope that kills you." You all know that? Heads nod. I disagree, Ted says. "I think it's the lack a hope that comes and gets ya. See, I believe in hope. I believe in belief." At which point, Ted gestures to a bright yellow sign that he taped above the door on his first day. It reads simply: "Believe." He concludes: "Now, where I'm from, we've got a saying too. A question, actually. Do you believe in miracles? ... Do you believe in miracles?"*

We could ask the same question of Mary and Martha — the sisters who feature in this story from John, the sisters who four days ago buried their brother, Lazarus. When we meet Mary and Martha at this point in the story, they may well have answered: *No ... No we don't believe in miracles. Not anymore. Four days ago, yes, we believed. That's why we sent for Jesus. That's why we sent word that our brother was ill. But Jesus did not make it in time, and now all is lost.* For at this moment, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. The sisters have lost hope. The community that has gathered to console them has lost hope. There was a commonly-held belief among the Jews of Jesus' time that the soul stayed close to the body for three days following death. For three days, the soul lingered ... meaning that — for three days — a dead body might still be revived, breath might still be restored. It would be miraculous, yes! But not impossible. We've seen Jesus do it before ... But not now. Not on the fourth day, when the body shows clear signs of decay and the tomb reeks with the stench of death. Now, on the fourth day, the soul of Lazarus has departed. The wait for a miracle is over. All hope is lost.

We hear this resignation in the words both sisters speak when they go out to meet Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." We know this lament; many of us have uttered it too, in the moments *after* we stop praying for a miracle. "If only ... If only I'd stopped him from getting in that car. If only I'd called the doctor earlier." It seems to be the universal cry of the despairing. And it's heartbreaking, because it makes plain that there *was* hope once ... But not anymore. "Lord, if you had been here ..." Jesus responds to the sisters' shared lament in different ways. When *Mary* kneels before him, he offers compassion in the literal sense of the word: he suffers with. Jesus is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" and, so, he weeps. He weeps with Mary over the death of her brother. When *Martha* comes to Jesus, he offers her something else. He offers a promise: "Your brother will rise again," Jesus tells Martha. "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day," she says. It sounds like the practiced creed of the pious — the kind of affirmation to which the faithful cling in moments of despair. This belief is probably the only thing keeping Martha upright. Even though all is *now* lost, she fervently hopes that all is not *forever* lost.

We know this hope. We share this hope. It is the hope we proclaim with confidence on Easter morn, when we stand at the empty tomb and shout, "Alleluia!" Our belief in eternal life, our belief in resurrected life, is at the center of our faith. It is one of the things that offers comfort when all seems lost. Sometimes it is the *only* thing that offers comfort when all seems lost. But it actually doesn't capture the fullness of God's promise. In this moment, when — for Martha — all seems lost, Jesus offers more. "I am the resurrection and the life," he says. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this? Martha does not need to wait long to see what Jesus means by this statement. Though, even as the community stands at the tomb of Lazarus, it is clear her grief-stricken mind cannot fully grasp the promise Jesus offers. "Lord," she says, when Jesus commands the stone be rolled away — "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." But, again, Jesus assures her that there is still reason for hope.

“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” And, then, in an instant, everyone gathered sees the glory of God. They see what happens when the Resurrection and the Life calls into the darkness: *Come out!*

“Come out,” Jesus commands Lazarus. And, immediately, the body that’s been entombed for four days, the corpse popular belief held was beyond revival — this body is restored to life. Lazarus walks from the tomb, the grave-clothes still wrapped around his arms and legs and face. But, alive. Lazarus is alive. It is a sign that reveals God’s glory — glory that is beyond all comprehension. It is a sign that shows God’s power to defeat even death, a sign that prefigures Jesus’ own resurrection, when he will open the way to eternal life. It is a sign that reveals how things work in God’s realm. You see, in God’s realm, life always wins. This doesn’t mean that there aren’t tears. This doesn’t mean that there isn’t grief. This doesn’t mean that there isn’t a loss of hope. It simply means that God is greater than all these things. That God always stands on the side of life. That, even now, God works in and through ordinary and extraordinary moments to renew and restore life.

There’s a curious detail at the end of this story. It’s one that would be easy to overlook after the shock and awe of a dead man rising. But I think it’s worth noting. After Lazarus walks from the tomb, Jesus turns to the crowd and commands: “Unbind him, and let him go.” *Unbind him, and let him go.* It’s the last thing Jesus does in this story: he entrusts Lazarus to the community’s care. He commands those who had witnessed resurrection to continue the work of resurrection — to unravel the grave clothes and release Lazarus from the trappings of death. “I am the resurrection and the life.” Jesus is the One who renews and restores life. Jesus is *still* the one who renews and restores life — though not usually in such a dramatic and emphatic way as calling Lazarus from the tomb. But, ever since the divine Word first called forth life, this has been at the heart of God’s mission. And it’s at the heart of *our* mission as followers of the Risen Lord. Christ calls us to participate in the work of resurrection — right here, right now, on *this* side of the grave.

A colleague at Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis tells the story of how one family in her congregation embraced this calling.<sup>1</sup> This is a story I’ve shared with you before. But I find it powerful, so I think it bears repeating. Many years ago, a young woman who’d been raised at Idlewild was at a point when all seemed lost. She was in the clutches of despair and — in a moment of hopelessness — she attempted to take her own life. Thankfully she was *not* successful. In the weeks that followed, as this young woman was recovering at home, a plate of brownies appeared on her doorstep. They were covered in foil with a crayoned note scotch-taped to the top. All the note said was, “If she falls down, will you help pick her up?”

It is one of the questions the pastors of Idlewild ask the children of that congregation every time they celebrate a baptism:

*Do you promise to be a friend to little Sarah?  
Will you play with her, and share with her the stories of Jesus?  
If she needs directions, will you show her the way?  
If she falls down, will you help pick her up?*

The family who baked those brownies was the first to call and ask this young woman to care for their children — to come over and babysit the little boys who wrote that note in crayon. That family was the first to extend their trust, to affirm that this teenager who’d been in the clutches of despair and death had something beautiful to offer the world. Their generosity of spirit helped this young woman find healing. As she mentioned a decade

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Anne H. K. Apple, “Baptism,” from the *Confirmation for the Rest of Us* series, published by Wayne Presbyterian Church (Wayne, PA), [www.waynepres.org](http://www.waynepres.org).

later, when she shared her faith journey prior to ordination as an Elder at Idlewild, this family's gracious gesture helped her experience the gift of new life. *Unbind her, and let her go*, Jesus says. And this family did. They might not have been the ones to revive this young woman, to call her out of the darkness. But they did help *restore* her to life. They did help to unbind the trappings of death, and point her to the abundance Christ offers. They did participate in the work of resurrection.

"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Some might call this family's gift an act of profound kindness, which it is. People of faith might call it the church being the church. This is also true. But I think there are better ways to speak of this family's generosity and the transformation it invited. In fact, I call it a miracle of new life. I call it a glimpse of the glory of God.

Because I believe miracles happen, wherever the Spirit is present. I believe miracles happen in the ordinary, extraordinary ways we care for one another as the community of Christ ... By weeping together when all seems lost. Through acts of service that help release one another from the things that bind, from the very clutches of death. By standing with God on the side of life — helping to relieve suffering, advocating for the well-being of all, extending support and offering welcome as new lives take shape. I believe miracles happen when we point one another to the source of our hope — to the Resurrection and the Life, the One who calls us to be people of resurrection. Through acts of service, through gestures of grace large and small, we do glimpse the glory of God. So, I ask you: Do you believe in miracles? Do you believe that you will see the glory — and grace — of God?

### **Prayers of the People – K.C. Morrison**

Let us pray.

Dear God. We come in this moment of stress, shaken confidence, and anxiousness, barely able to countenance a new day with its inevitable uncertainties. We have a unique neediness just now—experiencing daily traumas that leave us grasping for your presence, your intervention. So we come now with this weight, seeking guidance and hope.

It is not as if these conditions are unknown in our lives. Indeed, your promise has always been that life is filled with travails and endurance tests. But you also remind us that joy and fulfillment are the other side of that coin—giving us assurance that holding fast to faith always provides a vast reservoir of strengths to vanquish travails and sustain the sunshine of your goodness and grace.

Yet, in this moment, dear God, the cumulation of travails seem almost to overwhelm us. So deep is this crevice that sometimes when we pause to pray, the words forsake us—we tremble in silence, or simply dissolve. We wonder if our faith is strong enough, or if the forces of evil have prevailed after all. Alas, this cumulation of travails is that unique place where many of us reside right now.

But even in this deep crevice, we come bearing our souls knowing that just as you did for Mary and Martha, you hear us and tend us—offering the marvel of resurrection that give us abiding hope and trust for renewal. So, dear God, we beseech you now to give us perspective to live and thrive in this moment. Help us to be resurrected anew to live out the promise of walking in the path of righteousness.

We ask to be at one with the earth and each other as we seek a path beyond floods, fires, famines, earthquakes, world-wide pestilence. Show us a path to live in a manner to sustain the earth you have bequeathed us—to grow in exercising responsibility for protection of literally the ground upon which we walk—to preserve its riches for

sustenance—air, water, and food. Help us to take advantage of your gifts of science and technical knowledge that give us the wherewithal for abundant life in this earth. Help us to gain the perspective to see that when we sustain the earth, we honor the marvel of creation and its riches to alleviate trauma.

Then, there are the ways that we are with each other that exacerbate our traumas—using artificial barriers of race, class, gender, and hierarchy to diminish the reality that we are all children of God. Help us to learn to take advantage of that path you have already made so plain: to live as the whole siblings that we are in the marvelous variations by which you have made us.

So, guide us to a resurrection anew so that like Lazarus we rise again. And in that miraculous symbolic act, help us rededicate ourselves to the promise of walking in a style that reflects you, and gives us the enthusiasm to pray together as you taught us ...

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.**