



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Living Hope" - Grit and Grace Sermon Series

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I love the gospel of John. It's the last of the four gospels to be written. I think it is safe to say that John read the other three accounts of the life of Christ written by Matthew, Mark and Luke before he writes his gospel. John writes with his own priorities in mind – just like the other three did. One of the things he does, that I love, is fill in some of the gaps in the story of Jesus.

For example, one of the things that I think John does in chapter 11 is take a run a rehabilitating the reputation of one of the most courageous and remarkable disciples of Jesus – a woman by the name of Martha. If you've read the gospel of John you'll remember that chapter 11 contains an amazing story about two sisters and their brother.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus are three of Jesus' closest friends. Lazarus gets sick and dies. Mary and Martha send for Jesus who is staying about a day's journey away from their town. One of the most surprising things about this story is that Jesus stays where He is for two more days after hearing the desperate plea of His friends. What's that all about? When he finally arrives, His friend Lazarus has been dead for four days. Martha is heart broken. She's confused. And I

think it's safe to say that she's also probably upset with Jesus. When she hears that Jesus and His disciples are finally pulling up in front of her house, she marches out the door to speak with Him.

Martha walks up to Jesus and says. *"If you had been here, Jesus, my brother would not have died. I know you could have helped him."*

We're going to listen to how John tells the story of how Jesus steps into this tragic situation. He steps into their grief and steadies Martha and her sister Mary. He listens to Martha's complaint and Jesus looks straight into her eyes and says, in verse 23 of John chapter 11, *"Your brother will rise again."* And Martha has a response for Jesus. Verse 24 Martha said to Him, *"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."* And then Jesus has a response for Martha that's going to knock her socks off. Verse 25 Jesus said to her, *"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. Do you believe this (Martha)?"*

Martha's beloved brother is dead! Jesus missed His opportunity to keep Lazarus from dying. We've entered what seems to be a place where hope has

also died or is hanging by a thread for Martha and Mary. And yet Jesus says that there is still a reason for hope and Jesus, Himself is that reason.

Now listen to this response from Martha, this remarkable woman of faith. Verse 27 (Martha) said to Him, *"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

That's one of the most amazing affirmations of faith that we have in any of the gospels. But even with that great affirmation, Martha struggles to believe that Jesus can do anything about what is currently breaking her heart. Her brother has been dead for four days. What can possibly be done?

I love the fact that John includes this story and these details in his gospel. It's not his main goal to rehabilitate Martha's reputation but by including this story in his gospel that's exactly what he does. If all we had were the first three gospels all we would know about Martha is that she was a bit of a complainer. Without the gospel of John, the only thing we'd know about her is that one day she complained to Jesus that her sister Mary was not helping with the household chores. I like Martha, including the Martha in the gospel of Luke.

I like hard working people who are up for getting the job done. The picture that John paints of Martha is the picture of a person who can speak her mind, can express her fears and can, at the same time, grow in her capacity to trust.

Jesus invites Martha to walk with Him to the tomb of her brother. Jesus invites Martha to trust Him in the face of death. Standing outside the tomb of Martha's brother, Jesus speaks the powerful, re-creative word of life, "Lazarus, Come forth!" and the impossible happens. Lazarus walks out of his grave!

I want us to consider how Martha's trust in Jesus was tested and grew. She believed and yet she doubted. Her faith was small and wavering. But the size of her faith did not keep Jesus from doing the impossible. In John chapter 11 we are encouraged to believe that death is not the final word for those who entrust themselves to Jesus. We are encouraged to believe that there is hope for life beyond the grave.

But there is something else John wants us to understand. Jesus stands outside other graves in our lives. Jesus wants to walk with us into other dead places in our lives where He can speak a word of resurrection and hope. Jesus stands outside other graves and other tombs; tombs of addiction, tombs filled with broken relationships, tombs filled with pain and anger and fear and disappointment and confusion. He steps into those places of hopelessness and despair and calls us to life.

I've been directly involved in the Democratic Republic of Congo for over 12 years. I've taken over 40 people to eastern Congo to work with HEAL Africa,

an indigenous Congolese hospital that is doing courageous, innovative work in the middle of what has been described as the worst humanitarian disaster since World War 2. I've introduced many people to what God is doing in the DRC through Ministries like Africa New Day, which is featured in the Rooted curriculum we use to launch small groups here at First Prez. Or Congo Initiative, which is a multifaceted mission that includes a Christian university that is raising up a new generation of young leaders. Congo Initiative is committed to Christ-centered transformation in young adults who can bring transformation and hope to their troubled nation. I am the current Chair of the US Board of Directors for Congo Initiative.

Each time I've traveled to the DRC there's been something that has happened that has throttled me. Something always happens that leaves me thinking deeply about the challenges facing the people living in this war-torn part of our world. Every time I've gone to eastern Congo something has happened that has rocked my life. One year it happened towards the end of our first week.

We were visiting a ministry to street children run by a family in Goma that I know. We had an amazing celebration of what they are doing to bring hope to the hopeless. As I stood in the back of the room where this celebration was taking place, my cell phone rang. It was one of our team members calling me from the compound where we stay when we're in this part of Congo.

She had made it home before the rest of our team who were all with me at the party. She called

me to let me know that something terrible had just happened at the place where we stay.

A Congolese 17 year-old young man, who had been working at the compound, a young guy who had traveled 400 miles from his home in search of work, had accidentally slipped on the mossy, concrete ramp that leads into Lake Kivu as he tried to simply cool himself off. The lake is extremely deep right there. Like many in Congo he did not know how to swim. So he quickly went under the water. Something most of us take for granted, he could not do. His co-workers looked up and could not see him. Since they also could not swim, they immediately began to yell for help.

Two brothers who are Congolese and live there, heard them yelling for help and ran down to the lake. One of them dove in and started swimming down in search of him. I'm not clear how long this boy had been in the water but when one of the brothers was just at the end of his capacity to hold his breath he looked and saw the boy but had to swim back to the surface. His brother immediately jumped in the water, swam down and found the boy, grabbed him by the foot and pulled him back to the surface.

By now, one of the volunteers from Australia who comes to HEAL Africa regularly to help train the hospital administrators, was now at the lake and began to administer CPR on this boy. One of the brothers, who dove in after this guy jumped in a car and drove the boy to the closest hospital but they told him they could do nothing for him.

He had to take him to another hospital, he drove to that hospital and it was there that this young 17-year old boy was pronounced dead.

That's the story our team member told me on the phone. So I gathered our group together while we were still at the celebration for the ministry that works with street children. I told them what had just happened and that they needed to prepare themselves for what they were about to experience.

By the time we pulled into the compound where we stay, it was dusk. We were immediately greeted by one of the brothers who had tried to save this boy. He was still physically trembling. We talked and we listened and we prayed. We made the decision to gather everyone on the staff of the guesthouse. We gathered all the staff, the guards, the kitchen staff, the guests who were staying there, the two brothers, my friend from Australia and his wife and our entire team.

As darkness fell and as an electrical storm began to erupt over the lake we stood together in the spot where this terrible thing happened. And there we read Scripture together, we held hands and prayed. One of the guards who patrols the compound all night long while we are there is a pastor in Goma and he started our time of prayer in Swahili. Prayers were offered in Swahili, in French and English as together we cried out to God.

There was no resurrection that night. No resurrection of a lifeless body. But there was still a resurrection of hope because Jesus was with us, grieving with us, steadying us, inviting us to still entrust ourselves to Him.

That moment has become for me emblematic. For me it was a picture of the ongoing, heart-breaking challenge of life in eastern Congo. There is so much senseless death. It still breaks my heart. Even today, the part of Eastern Congo I'm connected to is in the middle of an Ebola outbreak that is now an international crisis.

But what I continue to experience in Eastern Congo is that the veil, if I can call it that, between heaven and earth, is very thin in that place. Even on that terrible night I sensed Jesus Christ walking with my team, walking with me, walking with our friends in Congo. On that tragic night he spoke words of hope and life in the face of death and despair. The people of eastern Congo have experienced so much pain and destruction and still our sisters and brothers in Christ are able to affirm their hope in a God who is ready to walk with us into places of hopelessness and despair and speak words of life.

Jesus takes Martha on a journey of trust. It is a remarkable journey that is one we, too, can walk. It will require us to be honest with ourselves and with a God. We will need to be able to express both our thoughts and feelings. And we will also need to hang in there with Jesus when it becomes difficult for us to trust Him and do what He tells us to do. So, let's walk with Martha as she learns to trust Jesus more and see what God can do when all hope is lost.

Let's turn to John chapter 11 verse one: *Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume*

and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

It took one day for the messenger to walk from Bethany near Jerusalem to Bethany Beyond Jordan. Based on the chronology in the story it seems like Lazarus probably died not long after his sisters sent word to Jesus. For three more days Martha and Mary heard nothing from Jesus. Absolutely nothing. No message of encouragement that He was on His way. No word at all. He could have been back in Bethany near Jerusalem by the end of the second day, but Jesus doesn't come for four days.

Jesus knows that Lazarus has died and He waits until the fourth day, the day on which all hope dies, to reach Mary and Martha. There was a Jewish custom in the first century, that believed that the soul hovered near the body for three days in the hope that physical life might be restored. Jesus waits until the fourth day – the day on which hope dies. He waits because He knows what He is going to do. God is going to be glorified in the most astounding miracle Jesus ever did.

For the authorities, what Jesus does in John chapter 11 is the straw that breaks the camel's back. Strangely, this resurrection miracle is what gets Jesus killed. Jesus will risk His own life for His friend Lazarus, and because Jesus does, Lazarus will live. Jesus will leave a place of safety and go to the place of danger because of His love for His friends. Lazarus will live because Jesus is willing to die. That is true for us as well.

John chapter 11:17 *“When Jesus arrived, He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met Him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of Him.’”*

Can you hear the pain in her voice? She’s hurting. She’s frustrated. She feels let down by Jesus. She knows how long it should have taken for Him to come back to Bethany. Where has He been? She’s hurt and maybe even angry. Notice what Jesus does not do. He doesn’t defend Himself and He doesn’t try to change her feelings. Jesus allows Martha to feel and express her emotions.

That is great news for us. We can come to Jesus and express our feelings honestly. The pain is real and Martha is allowed to express it to her Lord. He can handle our anger, our depression, our deep feelings of loss. Part of the way we learn to trust Jesus is by honestly expressing to Jesus our real emotions.

Verse 23: *Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”* Martha is affirming a common belief among the people taught by the Pharisees. They believed that there would come a day when the faithful would be raised to life. But it seems that Martha takes very little comfort in this. Watch Jesus tenderly

speaking to her fears, her disappointment and her pain. Here comes one of the most remarkable things Jesus ever says.

Verse 25: *Jesus said to her, “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. Do you believe this?” She said to Him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*

In the middle of her pain Jesus makes a remarkable promise to her. Jesus gently reminds her of the hope of the resurrection on the last day and then He speaks to her present pain: *“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.”* He doesn’t say, “There is a resurrection and there is life somewhere out there and way out in the future but I AM the resurrection and the life.” One of the most extraordinary assertions Jesus makes is that death is not the last word for those who believe and trust Him. He says, *“I am the life.”* And because that is so, in Him we can be raised to life even when we die.

What Jesus is saying is that life is in Him, in fact that life is Jesus Himself. The astounding assertion of Jesus is this: Anyone who receives Jesus receives everlasting life. So that is why Jesus can say “even though a person dies, they will live.” The implications are truly monumental. To be bound to Jesus by faith is to share right now the life that is from beyond the grave. So, Jesus asserts that the pain that Martha is feeling is met with a promise that is every

bit as real as her pain. Watch what happens. Martha’s capacity to trust is growing. After Jesus has a conversation with Martha’s sister Mary that Jenny Sung spoke about so brilliantly last Sunday, Jesus watches as Mary begins to cry.

John tells us something truly life-changing. We need to know this about our God. John tells us that Jesus begins to weep. This verb means to quietly shed tears. Isn’t this remarkable. The incarnate creator quietly sheds tears. People often ask the question, where is God when there is so much pain and suffering in the world. Where was God the afternoon that young Congolese man slipped into the lake and drowned? Where is God when an endless list of other tragedies unfold in our world and in our lives? This passage shows us exactly where God is. He is standing with those who are suffering, and He is weeping.

The Greeks believed that the gods were impassible. They thought for a god to truly be a god that the gods could not feel emotions, especially pain. Jesus shows them that they got that wrong. Here we see the living God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, crying. And part of the good news of the gospel is that we have a God who will weep with us for as long as we have tears to shed. Here is the God of boundless compassion who cries with those who are hurting.

Now, here comes the final scene in this story. Watch Martha. Her trust hits some turbulence. Her capacity to trust Jesus with the tragic death of her brother grows and then her trust begins to wobble. All of us know what that is like.

Verse 38: *Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to Him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard Me. I knew that you always hear Me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When He had said this, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

God incarnate, with tears streaming down His face, stares death in the face and cries in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" When Jesus speaks, the dead are raised to life. The literal grave is not the only grave you and I face. There are all sorts of figurative graves we find ourselves living in. Graves we've dug in anger and selfishness. Graves we've dug for ourselves with self-righteousness. Graves dug with our fears. Graves dug with addictions, bitterness and greed. Jesus weeps outside those graves, too. But the risen Lord can call us out of those graves as well.

We are in a sermon series on the women of the Bible and Martha is one of the most remarkable people in all of Scripture. If we follow her lead I think we can learn to trust Jesus more. And it is what He does for the world on the cross that gives

us the reason we can put our confidence, our trust in Him.

This is what I am coming to understand about our God, the God we meet in Jesus Christ. Our God steps into places of hopelessness and despair and calls us to life. This is what Martha learned. He stoops down into the brokenness of our lives and our world and brings hope and life.

Are you in need of God's resurrection power right now in your life? I think Jesus wants to meet with some of us today. If you feel like you are standing in a graveyard, and you want to be prayed for then I want you to do something very brave. This is a safe place. If you would like someone to pray with you right now, what I'd like to ask you to do is to stand where you are and we're going to have people near you come pray silently for you. If standing seems like too much to do right now, would you just raise your hand and someone will come and pray. You don't need to tell anyone what you're going through and no one is going to ask you. We're just going to pray. For those of you who are going to pray just do so quietly. This is not a counseling session. They don't need you they need Jesus.

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