

## **FINDING RESURRECTION HOPE**

(Honoring Pastor Larry Johnson's Homegoing on his First Anniversary)

John 11:17-27 -- Pastor Richard P. Carlson

God has so created and formed us that somehow, we can bear pain and sorrow including the tragedies of the loss of one or more of our loved ones. When our sorrow becomes overwhelming, God allows us to be temporarily anesthetized so we do not have to face grim reality all at once. The anesthetization is called a state of shock which has ten basic stages to it, after the death of a loved one. Dr. Granger Westberg, in a little paperback book he wrote called "Good Grief," written in 1962, describes these ten stages of the grieving process. This classic work based on this doctor's studies in cooperation with other doctors, nurses, pastors, counselors, and medical clinicians, has sold over 3 million copies, and it observes that in the face of death and grieving, everyone goes through many, if not all ten of these commonly observed stages, but not all in the same order for each of us.

"Stage 1 is – We are in an anesthetized state of shock. 2 – We express emotion—often tears. 3 – We feel depressed and very lonely. 4 – We feel and experience different symptoms of physical, emotional, and mental distress. 5 – We may become panicky. 6- We feel a sense of guilt about the loss—with our many "if only's. 7 – We are filled with hostility and resentment we can't explain. 8 – We are unable to return to usual activities. 9 – Gradually hope comes through. 10 – We struggle to readjust to reality." None of these stages are strange, sinful, or shameful, but normal behavior for each of us, you and me, when things happen like last year, 2023, from February to September, during eight months of mounting grief when Norm and then Maren Kneeland went Home to Glory, then Janell Huff, then Pastor Larry, and then John Blatter. We've all been grieving slowly as a church, and individually, but slowly attempting to return to normal activities, gaining hope and readjusting to reality.

All of us have gone through the excruciating loss of our Associate Pastor Larry since last August 14. We all need God's hope to face the days ahead and to find in Lazarus' story, our resurrection hope. This past Wednesday night, before our lesson on hope, we had many of you share your remembrances and thanksgiving to God for Pastor Larry. None of us can know the same grief of Dorie, their son and their daughters and family. Yet, we all in some measure, have suffered overwhelming grief. This associate pastor God sent us in 1996 to help me, worked beside me faithfully for 27 ½ years. When God sent Pastor Larry, his job description was to help me as long as we were both alive and serving in our church. God was so good to give us those many years serving side by side. We never exchanged cross words, we agreed in our statement of faith to a T, though our denominational backgrounds were differing. Pastor Larry assisted me, helping me in every way, with his pattern of intercessory prayer, his pattern of giving both money and writing letters, with his love for Jesus and his desire to be with the Lord, with his punctual legacy of being on time, with his willingness to be a helper, and there have been few helpers like him, with his pattern of living a continual life of repentance, and with his legacy of living with an eternal perspective. If any of you missed the fact that I

have struggled to readjust to Pastor Larry's departure, you've missed the obvious. It still feels more like an amputation than just his Home-going. He respected me; I respected him. He never raised his voice against me, nor I, against him. God led us together. We worked hand in glove together under the shadow of the Almighty. Before I turn to our text today, remember that Pastor Larry was a true associate, assistant, and helper. Between us, we could finish each other's work, if the other was away, we could explain our statement of faith with the same emphases, despite our different styles of ministry. We had the same love for this flock, for all of you, and we had the same sense of living in thanksgiving for God leading us together. I still mourn his Homegoing, though I do not wish him back, for he made it Home to Jesus before each of us have. Pastor Larry is in the "great cloud of witnesses, where we who know Jesus will soon join him, should Jesus tarry His coming.

Grieving doesn't only take its toll in our dying, but also, in sudden, difficult changing circumstances. I still mourn the day when Pastor Kevin felt God's urging to step down as our Pastor of Worship and Small Groups, after serving here for 19+ years. I already sorely miss the sweet fellowship Pastor Will and I have shared over the past years, and he has only been gone 3 weeks, deployed for a year to the middle east. Grieving is part of life. None of us can escape it. God is forever going before us to help us readjust to changes that life brings. As I turn to our text, I appeal to all of us, Never mistake the miracle of love and grace that God did when He saved you and me. And never mistake God's love in giving us to each other and the manifest blessing of living in each other's presence. One or both of us could be gone in a heartbeat. Don't live as if tomorrow will always be the same. Things can change in a heartbeat. If you have people to forgive, do it now. If you have sins to confess, do it now. If you have unfinished work to do, do it now. We have no promise of tomorrow. We all must remember, "We're going to die, and we're not in charge of when." Now, let's turn to our text.

Our text in John 11:17 begins with Jesus arriving in the outskirts of Bethany, two miles east of Jerusalem, on the road from Jericho, on the west bank of the Jordan River, up, up, up the mountain to Jerusalem, the holy city. This was the eastern road filled with pilgrims heading to the Passover Feast. Word traveled quickly to the house of mourning where Martha and Mary were deeply engulfed in sorrow.

Their brother Lazarus had now been dead and buried for four days and Jesus' arrival was obviously far too late to save Lazarus' life. Yet, whenever Jesus' presence is known and acknowledged, it may seem four days late, but it still can be on time. When Martha heard Jesus and His disciples were near Bethany, she hurried to meet Jesus. Mary stayed in the house weeping. In this Jewish home, the chores had ceased. Meals were not being made regularly, but were snatched here and there as loved ones and friends brought in food to comfort and encourage the grieving sisters, and to keep them from feeling loneliness as much. Martha and Mary were doubtless wishing to have time alone, just the two of them, to cry and unashamedly pour out their souls to each other and to God. This was the scene that Jesus was walking into and soon to arrive at, when Martha ran to meet Him.

Today, I sense God's Spirit directing me to share with you three necessities we all must recognize in the presence of death, grieving, and despair. Don't minimize them as you join me in each of our own journeys through the valley of the shadow of death. Even as we continue our grief over the earthly loss of Pastor Larry, let's put these three necessities before us to recognize and act upon. What are they?

**WE MUST FACE JESUS WITH ALL OUR "IF ONLYS."** (I.) Notice in verse 21, "Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if (if only) You had been here, my brother would not have died." As Martha was running to meet Jesus, what was on her mind? First of all, reality had set in well. Lazarus had been gone and was now buried in a cave with a stone against it for four days--v. 38. What did that mean to Martha and Mary and what should that mean to us? I know about death as many of you, but I refreshed my memory by researching what happens at death after four days if our bodies are not embalmed. All the factors bring a stench, an odor that is nauseous to smell, all of it happens within three days--72 hours. When our hearts stop beating as it will happen to me and to you, should Jesus tarry, our body cells are deprived of oxygen, so they begin to die. Blood drains from our circulatory system and pools in low places. Muscles begin to stiffen, which is called in Latin, rigor mortis, and this sets in within three hours. By 24 hours, our whole body has lost all its heat, and in 36 hours, the muscles lose their rigor mortis, and the body becomes soft. As cells die, bacteria break the cells down and decomposing tissue begins to look horrific. The odor by 72 hours is unbearable to smell for long. Tissues release hydrogen sulfide, methane, and if any living thing can get to these tissues, parts of the body will be consumed. That's gruesome, but that's what Martha knew when she said in John 11:39, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." This was Lazarus and his bodily condition when Jesus arrived.

We first start facing the truth about what death does to our bodies when death comes. Martha was running to meet Jesus with her "if onlys" like we all do after death. We are filled with many "if only's." It all came out as Martha quit running when she got to Jesus and blurted out, "Lord," if, if only You had been here, my brother would not have died." If only, if only, if only. God wants us to blurt it all out to Him. He doesn't rebuke us for saying, "Why didn't you heal Pastor Larry or the one we are praying for?" Jesus can take it when we blurt out our "if onlys." We need to face our Father with our grief. Martha knew shortly after she sent the messenger to Jesus, that her brother Lazarus died. She knew Jesus never could have made it there in time. God longs for us to acknowledge our despairing "If onlys." If we haven't done that yet, today is not too late to face Jesus with our many "If onlys" today. Do it now.

**WE MUST FIND HOPE IN JESUS WHICH OVERCOMES OUR DESPAIR.**

(II.) Notice in verse 22, as Martha spoke more to Jesus, saying, "But even now, I know that whatever You ask from God, God will give You." Before we look at these words, notice the mighty confession Martha made in the first words out of her mouth. What was her first word to Jesus? "Lord," -- what a mighty confession! Did Martha remember the message the messenger came back with from Jesus? Jesus sent the message back, John 11:4, "This illness does not lead to death. It is

for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Listen to Martha’s words to Jesus. Listen to her window of hope. She said, “But even now, (four days late) I know that whatever you ask from God, God (the Father) will give you.” What kind of words are these in Martha’s wrestling mind as she stood before Jesus? Martha knew who she was talking to, even though she had been too busy to hear all Jesus said to the disciples in her home while she was busy serving and Mary was seated at Jesus’ feet. Martha knew she was talking to the Lord.

What else did Martha know? She knew of the healing of Jairus’ daughter as Jesus raised him from the dead. She would have remembered that Jesus stopped a funeral procession and raised the dead son of the widow of Nain. Maybe some people said that those two resurrections were not resurrections but only healings because they happened on the same day those two people died. Did Martha wonder if Jesus could heal dead people? I don’t think so. I don’t believe she wondered about Jesus’ ability to raise dead people, but would He choose raise Lazarus? Martha knew Jesus healed thousands of sick people; that if He desired, He could have healed Lazarus from across the Jordan River, when He got the message, “Lord, he whom You love is ill.” She knew Jesus healed many people with whom He had no close connection or relationship. Surely, if He wanted to, He could have healed Lazarus from afar. Martha knew how much Jesus loved Lazarus. We know Martha knew how often she had repeated the message Jesus sent back to her, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the Son of God to be glorified. Every time her faith dwindled, and she repeated Jesus’ words, was not her despairing faith and hope fanned into flame? We all know how convincing despair can be over the very words of God. In these few words to Jesus, I see more than smoke. I see a flame of the fire of hope in Martha’s heart. Could it be true? What was Jesus going to do?

**WE MUST FOCUS OUR FAITH AND BELIEVE IN THE SON OF GOD WHO SAID, “I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.** (III.)

Notice verses 23-27. “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.” Jesus said to her. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She said to Him, “Yes Lord; I believe that You are Christ (Messiah) the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” Martha knew her doctrine of last things quite well. She knew Job 19:25-27. “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” She also knew prophet Daniel’s words in Daniel 12:2, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

Martha knew the power of her Messiah, Christ. Martha’s meditations became words of hope to Jesus in John 11:22, “But even now, I know that whatever You ask from God (Your Father), God will give You.” Martha understood as a very disciplined believer about the Old Testament promises of resurrection. She must have heard or overheard Jesus say in John 5:27-29 that God the Father gave Him

authority to execute judgement because He is the Son of Man. Jesus said, “Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out—those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” Martha must have heard or heard it recounted to her that Jesus had said in John 5:24, “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and now is here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” Each of us who know Jesus today, know as Ephesians 2:1 tells us, “that we once were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once walked.” Yet, when we heard the Spirit of God call us, we came to Jesus. As much as Martha knew already, she knew rightly; there is coming a resurrection of the just and unjust.

What a joy to know that one day both those of us who are alive in Christ, as well as those like Pastor Larry who have died in Christ will all be reunited. Martha as well as the Jews knew well the words of King David when his infant son died in II Samuel 12:22-23, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, “Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.” Martha believed like David did. Her belief was indisputable. But her hopes as she fought the battle between hope and despair were dwindling. That’s when Jesus took Martha further. He said not only, “Your brother will rise again, but He also in His 5<sup>th</sup> of the 7 “I AM’s” in John’s Gospel, said, He said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.” Then Jesus added His question, “Do you believe this?” And Martha confessed, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” Glory!!!! There is no confession, including Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God,” that is any stronger in faith.

I ask you, “Do you believe?” Jesus said, “Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.” These same words “whoever” show up in John 3:15,16,4:13,14—are both whoever and everyone. John 11:26, and 12:46, saying, “Whoever believes in Me may not remain in darkness.” In Mt.10:33—“Whoever denies Me..” Mark 3:35--“Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” Mark 8:34-35 and Luke 9:24-26 say, “Whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it.” Romans 9:33, “Whoever believes in Him (Jesus) will not be put to shame.” I John 4:15 says, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God.” I John 5:1,18, says, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God,” and everyone born of God does not keep on sinning.” I close with a chorus written in 1940 by Arthur J. Pankratz. “Jesus said that whosoever will, whosoever will, whosoever will, Jesus said that whosoever will, whosoever will may come. I’m so glad that He included me, He included me, He included me. I’m so glad that He included me, when Jesus said that whosoever will may come.” Jesus saw the inner battle in Martha and the inner battles in our hearts. He included Martha and He includes us in His whoever. He doesn’t want despair to win out. He always challenges us to faith and hope. Do you believe?

Jesus' words of "whosoever" and "everyone" bring to mind five pastoral words of warning to us as we hear compelling voices coming to us, not from the Word but from a confession of faith. These are pastoral warnings to keep us on track with our Lord Jesus Christ who said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die." Here they are:

1 - Don't ever let your doctrine or theology tie up or limit the hands, the heart, or the "whosoever" of our Lord Jesus Christ. Never forget John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

2 - Don't interpret the Bible through the lens of your creed, be it ancient, old, or new. Let the revealed Word of God loose to show you His love has no limit, His grace has no measure, His power has no boundary known unto men. Christ's atonement is not limited to some. His sacrificial substitutionary atonement was for all. Remember the last chapter in the Bible, in Revelation 22:17 states, "The Spirit and the Bride say "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; and whosoever will, let him/the one who desires, take the water of life freely/without price."

3 - Don't put God in a box so you limit whom He can save. Hebrews 7:25 is clear, "Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." God does not save only certain select, elect, and then condemn others to give Him pleasure or glory—to cast millions into hell. Many creeds say so. Ezekiel 18:31-32 states, "Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby you have transgressed, and make yourself a new heart and a new spirit; for why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dies, says the Lord God; therefore, repent and live." I Peter 3:9 is clear, "The Lord is longsuffering to us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

4 - Don't believe God's offer of grace is irresistible. Millions resist Christ's offer daily. John 1:11 tells us, "He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him." The last words of Stephen are powerful as he spoke to those ready to stone him. "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, you do always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did, so do you." And Jesus own words in Matthew 23:37 are from our Savior. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her chicks/brood under her wings, and you were not willing."

5 - Don't believe God regenerates whom He will with no condition of believing. 99 times in John's Gospel we find the word believing. Romans 10:9,10 is clear—**"If** you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Beloved, do you believe?