

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

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John 11

Sean Clegg was an active 14-year-old boy who lived in Tabernacle, New Jersey. He liked Harry Potter and sports. He played on a baseball team. He was known as a boy who was kind and giving to his friends. One Sunday afternoon, ten years ago, Sean was riding his bicycle near his home when he was struck by a car. He died from the injuries.

Sean's parents were understandably devastated at the tragedy but they also wondered how something positive might come out of this heartbreaking loss. They wondered if their son could become an organ donor. Since he had been strong and healthy, the answer was yes. The Cleggs donated their son's body. His organs and tissues benefitted over one-hundred people around the world. Some of these people would have died without Sean's donation. That was ten years ago and today the Clegg family maintains an extraordinary relationship with a number of these recipients. They consider them extended family.¹

Today is Easter—the day we celebrate Christ's resurrection. We have arrived at this place through the events of the days of Holy Week. On Thursday, Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples. After the meal, while praying in the garden, Judas led the authorities to arrest him. Jesus was taken into Jerusalem and tried and sentenced to death. The next day, Friday, after being beaten and flogged, Jesus was executed by crucifixion. On Friday afternoon, because the Sabbath was approaching at sunset, his body was hurriedly placed into a borrowed tomb. On Sunday, very early—even before sunrise—Mary Magdalene (and possibly some other women) went to the tomb in order to begin the preparations for a proper burial. When they arrived, they discovered that someone had tampered with the tomb. The rock which served as a door had been pushed back and the tomb was open. The women feared the worst—that the authorities, in order to prevent Jesus from becoming a public martyr, had stolen the body. Looking into the tomb, the women could see that indeed the body was missing. Each gospel reports that one or two men are present to meet the women. In Mark's account, these men (whom we recognize as angels) say to them, *Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you* (Mark 16:6-7). Finally, then, Jesus appears to his followers and stays with them until the Ascension.

¹ The story of Sean Clegg was written by Allison Klein and appeared in the Washington Post on March 30, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2018/03/30/after-a-teenager-died-his-organs-provided-life-to-others-and-a-bigger-family-to-his-parents/?utm_term=.f07a1fbc0c24

Remember, Jesus had been crucified. He had died and was buried. You would expect that when he made his Easter appearance he would proclaim to everyone, *I am the resurrection and the life*. After all, he had overcome death itself. He was the embodiment of resurrection. But, in fact, he has already made this statement much earlier in his ministry.

Through this season of Lent, I have been preaching this series on Jesus' **I Am** statements. These **I Am** statements appear solely in the fourth gospel, the Gospel of John. John uses these statements to help us better understand who Jesus is. John wants to make sure that we understand that Jesus is more than just a talented rabbi., an engaging speaker, an imaginative teacher. He is divine, he is God's son.

In John's gospel, when Jesus says, *I am the light of the world* he is the light which illumines God for those of us living in darkness.

When Jesus says *I am the gate* he is the doorway to forgiveness and grace.

When Jesus says *I am the bread of life* he is the divine nourishment which feeds our hungry spirits.

When Jesus says *I am the good shepherd* he is the one who gives his life for his sheep.

When Jesus says *I am the way, the truth, and the life* he is the path to our salvation.

Our reading today is the conclusion of this **I Am** series. Here Jesus declares, *I am the resurrection and the life*. And he says this not about his own resurrection but in response to the raising of Lazarus.

Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary are close friends of Jesus. They live in the village of Bethany, a few miles outside Jerusalem. Lazarus becomes ill and his sisters send word to Jesus to come see him. Jesus receives the message but does not leave for Bethany for another two days. During this delay Lazarus dies. When Jesus finally gets to Bethany, Lazarus has been dead and in a tomb for four days.

Martha goes out to meet Jesus as he approaches the village. What she says to him surprises us. In her words we clearly hear her anger and grief and raw emotion. Martha says, *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*. Martha knows Jesus is a healer. Yes, he could have saved Lazarus from death. Martha then tempers her words by adding, *But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him*. Jesus responds to her with the assurance, *Your brother will rise again*. Then Martha says something that clues us in to her level of theological sophistication. She says, *Yes, I know he will rise again in the resurrection in the last day*. Martha comprehends the ultimate promise of resurrection—"Yes, I get it. In the end we will all be with God."

Then Jesus says 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?*

And Martha responds saying, *Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.* Even though she says it, you can tell that she doesn't grasp the full weight of the question. Martha does what we frequently do, she gives the rote answer, she gives the safe answer. It's like if someone asks us, "Are you a Christian? What do you believe?" and we recite the Apostles Creed. There is nothing wrong with that, but it lacks fire. Although Martha expresses her belief in Jesus and in the resurrection, she still weeps. The sisters' grief is so powerful it even infects Jesus. Then, weeping himself, Jesus goes to the tomb.

The tomb is a cave with a stone covering the entrance. Jesus gives the instruction, *take away the stone.* Martha points out that having been dead for four days, there is bound to be a stench. The King James bible puts it so succinctly when it reads, *Lord, by this time he stinketh.* Jesus says to Martha, *Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?* The stone is removed and Jesus cries in a loud voice, *Lazarus, come out.* Lazarus emerges from the tomb still wrapped in strips of cloth. Jesus says, *Unbind him, and let him go.*

This story is clear that not only is Jesus the resurrection and the life, this life is intrinsically tied to belief. There is a difference between an intellectual belief and the kind of belief you feel in your gut, the kind of belief that defines who you are. Those who believe in their minds make good Christians, doing the right thing, saying the right thing. The gut believers are driven by an unmistakable passion for God. They believe not in the idea of the Christ, but in the person of Christ. The resurrection isn't just for the Last Day, it is for us now. The resurrection is not just in the future, it is all around us.

Was it necessary for Jesus to raise Lazarus? No. Lazarus had died fair and square as part of the natural order. Jesus chose to renew his life as a demonstration of the greater resurrection, so that people would see and believe his words, *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.*

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Stefania DeMayo was 27 years old when Sean Clegg was killed while riding his bike. She received Sean's heart. The operation was a success and she has gone on to give birth to twin girls as well as a boy. Her doctors believe she is the first woman to give birth to twins after a heart transplant. Stefania and the Cleggs have developed an amazingly close relationship. She calls the Cleggs mom and dad and the kids are treated as grandchildren. They frequently visit on weekends. Gail Clegg calls Stefania the daughter she never had.

Melissa Coleman was on dialysis for ten hours each day before she received Sean's right kidney. Craig Lawton received a lung. They, too, are part of this "extended family."

For a donor's family to develop a relationship with the donor's recipients is unusual. But the Cleggs are different. Family get-togethers frequently include the DeMayos and other recipients. As Stefania DeMayo puts it, "I have a connection with them, because we were all in the same boat. We were all dying. One person brought us all together. That one person saved all of our lives."

That one person was 14-year-old Sean. From his tragic death emerged new life and resurrection. Dozens live because he died. Children who would not have been born have been brought into the world. Sean's mother says, "[These recipients] always tell me I saved their lives. I say it saved my life, too. Sean is gone but definitely not forgotten. All these other people are living because of him." This story about Sean is a testament to the power of resurrection and how life gives life.

Today is Easter and we gather here not just to give thanks for the new life which comes from Christ, but to marvel at the miraculous power of resurrection.

We can look at the story of Sean Clegg as a tragic story with a happy ending. But as a person of faith, I see this story as evidence of resurrection. Like the Lazarus story, it is a demonstration of God's power in this world. When we look at the world with eyes of faith, we will see new life, we in stories like Sean and in our own stories. When we believe as Christ asks us to believe, we will recognize resurrection everywhere. It is powerful. It is beautiful. It is God. Amen.