

I Am the Resurrection

John 11:21-26 | Bryce Beale | March 31, 2018

Every activity is tedium when done with only half a heart.

Exercise is of some value; but if half your heart hates entering the gym, you will probably stop entering it. If you are passionate about your work, your work will be a joy; if you are half-passionate about it, your work will be a job.

Where your heart is—your whole heart—there your treasure is.

It hardly matters the suffering a task requires—a whole heart will climb over the barbed wire as if it were straw. But for the half-heart, even straw under the knees feels like barbed wire.

This morning we are provided the opportunity to remember one tenant of the Christian faith: the resurrection of the dead.

We take this precious object from its case and it is set in our midst. And we, like so many appraisers, assess its value.

Some of you may think a revival of the deceased impossible, perhaps as a product of your strictly materialist worldview. “It is only natural to think our loved ones will return; it is unbearable to think them gone forever. And so we with every other culture of the earth have invented our own crutch for coping with the pain of death.” You who hold this opinion consider this jewel a fraud. Your heart does not go out to it at all.

But beside you is another class of persons—you who assent to the resurrection of the dead as a fact. You believe the body of our Lord was entombed two days, but not a third. And you can in sincerity offer your condolences at a Christian funeral, believing that the dead will rise again on the last day. You believe!

But, not quite with a whole heart. You see the resurrection, but you see it through squinted, blurry eyes. You assess the diamond before you and at first your heart goes out to it; but then you hesitate. How can you know it is no fraud? Half your heart stands excitedly with the jewel; the other half stands back and offers it a skeptical eye.

It is easy not to know, for long spans of time, that half your heart suspects the resurrection; you can live day by day for most your days and not be forced to inspect your heart on the matter.

But this only works for most your days. Because eventually, in your bustling about, you will turn a corner and there, immediately before you and coldly meeting your gaze, will be death.

Shortly after C. S. Lewis lost his wife to cancer, while the grief was still fresh and heavy, he scrawled into his journal, “You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn’t you then first discover how much you really trusted it?”¹

Let the resurrection of the dead and the joy of Easter be true, or let it be false; but do not let it be half true! A half-true resurrection might make a decent and civilized person out of you, but it cannot make you take up your cross and follow Christ on the dusty Via Dolorosa. You might give up your Sunday mornings for the possibility of a resurrection; but Christ wants more than your Sunday mornings. He wants zealots and martyrs.

The early disciples did not upturn the known world by the wilted strength of a half-hearted belief in the resurrection. It is easy to think you have given your heart to a doctrine until you are required to give your body to a lion, and then you discover where your heart is. When the chemotherapy has failed but your joy has not, then you upturn the world. Courage and joy in the face of death was the first and most effective gospel tract distributed by the early church, and it is one we must bring back into print.

In our text for today, one of Jesus’ followers, Martha, has turned a corner and come upon death—the death of her dear brother, Lazarus. And so her half-believing, half-doubting heart becomes clear. And since it has become clear, Jesus begins to work upon that heart, to bring its two fragmented pieces together.

JOHN 11:21-26

Martha is not unlike many of us. She believes in Jesus—the most notable feature of her speech in the gospels is the preface she appends to all but one of her statements: “Lord.” Twice we find her serving Jesus. In our present text, although cloaked with grief she still says true and orthodox things.

See the verses at the beginning of our text, 21 and 22: “Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.’”²

¹ *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 34-35.

² ESV.

And later in our text, verse 24: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

And finally, just afterward in verse 27: “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

She knows, she knows, and she believes. She serves. She says, “Lord.” Half her heart is firmly in the hands of the Savior, it firmly stands by the doctrine of the resurrection.

And half her heart wonders.

Our primary interest this morning is to see how Jesus brings these contrary parts of Martha together; but first we must see what it means that they are divided. Martha speaks rather well and does what is rather right—how do we know half her heart is in doubt?

Martha doubts

So let us begin there, with a consideration of Martha’s half belief.

Interestingly, Martha’s griefs in the face of death, and the realms of doubt it uncovered in her heart, are remarkably like our own.

This woman has witnessed her brother suffer on his sick bed; her one consolation there at the bedside of her friend, there when she and her sister Mary watched helplessly the life passing from this brother once so alive—her one comfort and one desperate hope was this, “Surely Jesus will come soon.”

Jesus’ power

She and Mary sent word to Jesus in verse 3: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” They pled for the sick much as we pray for them, and expected the Savior, who had healed so many others, to come and cleanse their brother of his ailment. Lazarus suffers; their hearts ache for him, but they hold the expectation that at any moment Jesus will be seen in the distance. Why wouldn’t he? This is Lazarus, whom he loves. If either sister had the power, they would set a soft hand upon the sick man’s tortured brow and he would be healed. Jesus has the power!

Doesn’t he?

See Martha’s first statement when Jesus finally arrives. Rushing outside the city, she meets Jesus and says, in verse 21, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

What is in this utterance? Not atheism, not an abandonment of faith—she believes that if Jesus had only come, he could have healed Lazarus. If only Jesus had acted differently, if only he had altered the

circumstances, then he could have done what surely he wanted to—he could have healed Lazarus. If only this small detail had differed, then the tragedy she now wept would have been only a near-tragedy. But the detail did not differ, and here she is, broken before the Lord. She has not abandoned faith, but there is quiet doubt in the power of her Savior.

What would unwavering faith in Jesus' power have said? It would have spoken like that believing Centurion whose faith Jesus commended as incomparable in Israel—when his servant neared death, he said, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.”³

Martha has some faith and believes if only circumstances had been different, if Jesus had been under her roof, then he could have healed Lazarus. But she limits Jesus' power to that. There is a doubt as to the celebrated power of Jesus; there is an attempt to make sense of the shattering sorrow she feels by confining Christ's power to a narrower space.

Arminian theology answers the problem of evil in this world with the same confinement of Christ's power—Jesus would prevent our suffering if he could, but he cannot violate the human will. This is not true; Jesus can do what he wants with the wills he has created. But sorrow suggests this limitation of Christ's power as it wrestles with itself.

So Martha can say in verse 22, “even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Half her heart speaks that way, confident in what Jesus can do. But the other half confines him, and in its pain looks skeptically upon his power. Here is Martha's divided heart.

Jesus' wisdom

But she wrestles, like us, with more than Jesus' power—she wonders too about his wisdom.

Surely Jesus, wise in counsel, knows what to do and when to do it.

Doesn't he?

She is too polite to say it, so she only implies it: “if you had been here!”

Lazarus has suffered before her and slipped into the irretrievable distance of death; perhaps she was there when he ceased to breathe, and her hope for Jesus' coming, assaulted by each passing minute, died with her brother.

³ Matt. 8:8.

“Certainly he could have healed my brother if only he had been here—so why wasn’t he here? Why didn’t my God show up? What was he doing? Not one kind-hearted man on this earth, if he had the power to heal Lazarus, would have refused a brief journey south to do it; none knowing the dire circumstance would have delayed two precious days. But Jesus did.”

In that conditional clause, “if you had been here,” is the subtle reproof, “you should have been here.” Martha cannot bring herself to state her doubt of Christ’s wisdom, but she cannot hide it in her implications, for it is the argument of half her heart.

Jesus’ love

But contained also in Martha’s implication is a darker doubt.

Jesus had never displayed any attitude toward these three siblings but love, in the purest form they had ever seen. And certainly he still loves them.

Doesn’t he?

Contained in “if you had been here” is almost certainly the whispered doubt, “Do you really love us?”

Love was the basis of their plea so many days before: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” They would not need to say more, they may have thought; love by definition desires the good of the beloved. Love would come.

Jesus didn’t come.

This doubt is not uncommon among suffering Christians. Lewis put it this way in his journal: “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”⁴

If God is love, then why would he permit this pain? If Christ loved Lazarus, why did he delay two days.

On the last day

These doubts together, I think, explain why Martha’s true statement in verse 24—“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day”—has to be corrected by Jesus.

Jesus has said something: “Your brother will rise again.” And Martha, with a torn, divided heart, affirms what Jesus has said: “I know that he

⁴ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 18-19.

will rise again.” But her heart appears in what she adds to Jesus’ statement: “I know that he will rise again *in the resurrection on the last day.*”⁵

Martha says a very proper and orthodox thing—the Pharisees and most of the Jewish people believed that there would be a resurrection of the dead on the last day. Daniel 12:2 says as much: “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.” When Jesus spoke of a resurrection of the just and the unjust, he only stepped on the toes of a small minority of Jews who disbelieved in such a thing. Most agreed with him on the point.

So why does Jesus seem to correct Martha in his reply? What has she missed?

I think we are all aware of that feeling of cheapness that sometimes attends the platitudes we bring to funerals. There is of course a way to say, “He is in a better place,” and mean it in a rich and deep way. But there is also a way to say, “He is in a better place,” and only mean it in a shallow way, as a sort of “I’m not sure what else to say, let’s see if this helps” kind of way. There is a way to believe in heaven as though it were a vague tradition—we are at a funeral, so we must bring a black tie, flowers, and heaven with us. And when we get home, heaven gets hung up next to our black tie.

Martha is holding just such a view of the resurrection. Half her heart has the notion ingrained upon it; the other half suspects it to be a cheap condolence.

“You say that Lazarus will rise again. Yes, I know, of course he will rise again someday, just like everybody else.” She takes Jesus’ words as though they were an insignificant platitude, because that is how she views the resurrection, holding to it with only half her heart.

Jesus is the resurrection

We have seen then Martha’s doubts, and we see that, as she faces death, she wrestles with thoughts not distant from some of our own. But she must not stay here—God forbid that she would stay here, believing with half a heart, and with half a heart skeptical of the Savior and his promise of a future life.

So Jesus reaches out his arms—he gives no sharp reply. Very soon his palms will prove they are not ashamed to touch our sins; they will contain the Roman nails of our vices. Now they are not ashamed to touch our doubts. With one hand he lays hold Martha’s half-heart of

⁵ Emphasis mine.

belief; with the other, her half-heart of doubt. And he begins to bring them together.

How does a divided heart, in a world wracked by the agonies of death, become one heart, one heart that whole-heartedly believes in the life to come? How is this possible?

For the answer, we look at Jesus' reply. Martha knew that Lazarus would rise again in the long-distant resurrection of the dead. But, verses 25 and 26, "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?'"

When pain invades a human life—especially the pain of separation that attends death—the unprepared heart is shaken and begins to grasp after something stable. Not infrequently the rope we reach for is the answer to "Why?" This is natural, but it is a hurt more than a help.

And it is a hurt because God rarely tells us why.

Martha's doubts are, all of them, built upon this insistence on making sense of her brother's death. She cannot imagine a specific reason for it. Jesus should have come—why didn't he? Lazarus should be alive—why isn't he? He shouldn't have suffered so much—why did he? And unable to imagine any answer to her why's, she settles on doubt. Perhaps Jesus made a mistake, and lapsed in his wisdom; perhaps his power has a limit; or maybe he does not love us as we thought he did.

Well, now she has an answer to her why, which is what she wanted—but as soon as she takes hold of that rope, it crumbles into sand beneath her grip. She has an answer to her why, but it is a false answer, and it offers no help.

It is as though Martha has been grabbing rope after rope, seeking some satisfying explanation for her pain. All have failed her. She reaches for the doctrine of the resurrection, but without a solid confidence in Jesus, this doctrine is just a doctrine. It is cold, impersonal.

Her ropes fallen, her hope flickering into darkness, Jesus now reaches out his hand toward that doubtful part of her heart. And he says, "I am the resurrection."

In other words, there is no comfort in the face of death but Jesus himself. Nothing apart from him can soothe the suffering soul.

So long as Martha sees the resurrection as something outside of Jesus, it cannot help her. It is a vague tradition somewhere in the future, but of little use now.

The resurrection without the living Jesus makes for a good holiday, but it will not stop a single tear. All the answers in the world, apart from Christ, would not give you the slightest reprieve from your grieving.

This is the emphasis in what Jesus says: “I am the resurrection and the life”—you will not find these elsewhere. You cannot have them without him. And in his explanation the emphasis remains: Whoever believes, or trusts, in Jesus himself, this is the one who lives even if he dies; and whoever lives and trusts in Jesus himself, this one will never die.

To trust in Jesus means to cling to him before you have the answers to your why’s, and even if you never get them.

How much trouble Martha would have been spared had she chosen to trust in Christ without explanation. She would have reasoned, “Lazarus has suffered and died, and Jesus is nowhere to be seen. I know this can be no deficiency of his wisdom, so there must be a good reason, the best reason. He could this moment heal my brother at a distance, with merely a word—he must have some reason for refraining. And he loves Lazarus, so he would not allow this illness to persist unless it was in Lazarus’ best interests.”

Call this a blind faith if you will, but it would have seen much more clearly than her reasonings without it.

It would have presupposed what was in fact true, what we, unlike Martha, are permitted to read in verse 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.”

Martha did not need to know that, only hours after her conversation with Jesus, he would summon her brother back from the grave. She did not need to know that this would encourage the faith of millions for two millennia to follow, and would exalt Christ before the eyes of innumerable masses. She did not need these answers; she had Jesus, there before her.

And so he kindly diverts her gaze away from her busy thoughts, and onto himself in simple faith. “I am the resurrection.”

Friends, I would divert your gaze in the same direction this morning.

If you feel you must have every explanation before you can rest your faith fully in Christ and in his gospel; if you cannot believe in a resurrection until you know for certain how a body, decayed over so many years, can return to a state of life—then you will never have a whole heart in this matter.

If reason must comprehend the “why” behind the evil and the suffering in this world, then reason will go on trying to comprehend without end and without success. You will never have a whole and peaceful heart.

How can you believe with both halves of your heart; how can you face death with the confidence of a martyr?

Jesus pulls both halves of the heart together, and pulls them to himself. That is how. Only Jesus himself can support the confidence of a whole heart.

It is true that faith must have propositions to believe—we cannot believe in Jesus if we do not know who Jesus is, nor in his gospel if we do not know that gospel. It is necessary we understand that upon the cross a mortal did not merely endure the torture of execution, but the Son of God absorbed in those hours of darkness the full ocean, wave after wave, of God’s infernal wrath for the sins of his people. We must know that on the third day after his death, Jesus’ tomb was vacated, that this Victor ascended into heaven and promises to return, at which time the dead will rise and he himself will sit as their judge. Those who have believed in him will put on immortality and enjoy an undying life with him on a renewed earth, while those who have not believed enter eternal torment.

Here is the data and faith must hear this. If you agree with these propositions then you have that element of faith which theologians call *assensus*, and it is necessary.

But true faith must go further. *Assensus*, by itself, will crumble when pressed by suffering and death. *Assensus* believes in some far future resurrection to be accomplished by some distant Jesus.

There is a final element of faith without which faith is not faith—it is called *fiducia*. It is trust. And it is a trust, not simply in the data, but in Jesus himself. It is taking the hand of Christ, believing not that he provides a resurrection merely, but that he is the resurrection.

Christ is no stranger to our sorrow, and it was for our sakes that in his hour of agony he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We are prone to ask the identical question in our grief. So Jesus takes up the question himself and then teaches us how to finish it, with his parting words: “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Brothers and sisters, we do not await a cold and abstract moment called a resurrection; we believe in a Savior who is the resurrection. Our confidence in future happiness does not waver with our ability to understand every detail, but is set firmly in the hands of Christ. When

the door of death opens for us, we know Christ will have opened it and will stand on the other side with his hand extended to us.

Your confidence in the face of death, yours or your beloved's, a weeping confidence that upturns the world, will be as alive to you as your Savior is. Do not go looking for solace anywhere else, for Jesus always stands before you, hand outstretched, to say, "I am the resurrection....Do you believe this?"