

First Baptist Church of Augusta
John 11:25-26
In His Own Words: I Am the Resurrection
March 23, 2008
Easter 2008

John 11:25 *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

Have you thought about what you want to wear when you are buried? Most of the time when someone is laid out in their casket they are wearing their best: a favorite dress, their best suit, sometimes even a tuxedo. I remember when my Uncle J.B. died a few years ago. He was a seasoned farmer who also ran a saw mill. I spent many, many hours with him splitting firewood right up until he passed away. Although he owned and wore a suit to church, it did not reflect his life. So, he was buried in the clothes he lived in: liberty overalls.

Let's be honest, no matter what the deceased is wearing, it really will not brighten up the funeral. No one likes a funeral, even when the deceased has lived a good long time and death comes as a sweet release from all the world's troubles. Even the best of funerals, if there is such a thing, and I have been a part of them for a long time, are events marked by sadness on some level. In John chapter 11, Jesus finds himself at a funeral—the funeral of one of his friends. Lazarus was his name.

We know how all this will work out. Jesus reminds the grieving sisters with the words: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."* Jesus arrives at the tomb, twice we will read that he is greatly disturbed or upset, and he asks that the stone covering the entrance be rolled back. Of course, there is objection. Lazarus they say has been dead four days. This is not good. Still the stone is rolled back, Jesus prays and commands – he does not ask or suggest, he commands – for Lazarus to come out. And he does, wrapped head to toe in the clothes he was buried in. And then he says to the awed crowd: *"Unbind him and let him go."* (11:44)

What is it about the gospel of John, where the author is concerned about what people wore when they were entombed? This gospel goes to the trouble of mentioning grave cloths again, when it comes to Jesus. Scholars say the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead is prelude to the big story, the Easter story. Jesus has been dead in the tomb since Friday. We read about it a few chapters later, in chapter twenty. Let me share it with you:

*1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the **cloth** that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. (John 20:1-9)*

Why is it that the Gospel of John is so concerned with what the dead were wearing? Maybe, it is because we understand more about death than we do resurrection. Death we can accept. It is this resurrection part we have a hard time believing. We live, as the late Pope John Paul phrased it, in a

culture of death. We know about tombs and funerals, and what it feels like when you just buried your future, your hope.

It comes in a hospital room when the monitor stops beeping and the chest stops rising...death we know about.

It comes when our supervisor sits down with us mumbling something about downsizing and loss of business, and the next thing you know you are unemployed...death we know about.

It comes when divorce papers are served. It comes when the bottom of the bottle is never deep enough. It comes when we have cried ourselves to sleep from disappointment...oh yes, death we know about.

But resurrection? Isn't that just another Biblical story long ago? Is resurrection just the hopeful projections attempting to blunt our deepest fears? Do we find ourselves still cloaked, wrapped up in the vestiges of death?

Chuck Poole writes in his book, *Don't Cry Past Tuesday*, "The resurrection tells us that, while the worst things can and do happen, the worst thing that happens is never, never, never the last thing that happens" (p. 95).

Lazarus came from the tomb wrapped as a dead man, and Jesus said, "*Unbind him and let him go.*" When it was Jesus who was left in the tomb, it was discovered that Easter morning, Jesus left death behind.

Life is the very thing Jesus can provide. It was the final word for Lazarus, four days dead in the tomb. "*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.*" (John 10:43-44)

Maybe the Gospel of John is so fascinated with what the dead were wearing is because we need to leave death behind.

Unbind him and let him go. Like mummies, we stumble along in our daily pursuits but we are dead, dead, dead inside.

Unbind him and let him go. Donning our own grave cloths of despair we confess that desolation sometimes gets the better of us.

Unbind him and let him go. The recognition that our failures and sin has had a way with us, and once again we have disappointed people we love and have disappointed ourselves.

Unbind him and let him go. This one statement embodies the heart of God's mission towards creation. This **is** the good news. This is the word of liberation, that anyone who has been a slave to anything or anyone else understands. ***Unbind him and let him go.***

That event, that miracle, that sign of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, reflects God's desire for each of our lives. And even today, as we gather with Mary, Peter, and the other skeptical disciples, and witness the cast aside grave clothes in the empty Easter tomb, we are given the sign that death has no hold on us. It is Christ who wants to meet us where we are, to touch us like the leper and heal us, to give us a hopeful vision like the blind man. And, like Lazarus, unbind us from the bandages of shame and death, that keep us victims of a fearful and apathetic society.

That is as good a picture I can think of for the Easter message today. The power of God has come to us that we may cast off our grave clothes and emerge in a new life. Those grave cloths are more than just an apology for the resurrection. What I mean by that is, their presence in the story is not just to say,

“He rose from the dead – we have his burial clothes as proof.” Those grave cloths are there to remind us that when Jesus walked out of the tomb, he left death behind. And Jesus left death behind not just for himself, but for all those who want to follow him.

We cannot, however, know and live in the hope of resurrection if we are still ensnared in our own burial clothes. Friends, there is not one person in this room that does not need to hear this message again. *Leave behind the markings of the old, and walk in the power of God.* It doesn't matter to me if you have been a Sunday School teacher in this church for 40 years...*leave behind the old and walk in the power of God.* It doesn't matter if you have stumbled your way in here as a hopeless wreck, a scorn of society...*leave behind the old and walk in the power of God – **resurrection!*** The church is to be, as one minister writes of his congregation, a “fellowship of unbinding.”

Leave behind the grave cloths of:

Broken relationships

Some of us here today are bound up in the burial clothes of grudges and embitterment towards another. Grudges define most relationships.

Many of the hurts in our life are caused because we don't realize what we are doing. We loosely throw around opinions and comments that hurt feelings, or we push through our own agendas, without much consideration of the desires of another. One author rather succinctly stated “...so much of the pain of life is perpetrated in just this way – thoughtlessly, but without malice.”

Resurrection calls on us to live lovingly. This is not an option. We either are people of the resurrection, or we are just residents in the graveyard, still bound by the cloths of faulty relationships and the decay of unforgiving attitudes. Some this morning have phone calls, letters, visits to make...

Leave behind the grave cloths of:

Mediocrity

The grave cloths of mediocrity bind our life with desperation and despair, and so we settle for less. We settle for less in our marriages...less with our families...less with our church...we settle for less than the best for our selves.

Several years ago, I was invited to tour a new school in the community. As the headmaster was taking us on a tour of the campus we passed through a hall and he casually pointed out a door. He said, one day they hope to build a building that will connect on the other side of the door but for right now, “It is a dummy door. It leads to nowhere.”

A door that leads to nowhere. Do you think that is God's intention or hope for any of our lives? Of course not!

Resurrection means to live epically!

John 10:10...*I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly.*

You and I are part of a great epic story. We have a role, a part. Have you noticed that some of the most successful and enduring movies are epic dramas?

Gone With the Wind, Wizard of Oz, Star Wars, Titanic, and Lord of the Rings. What all of these stories have in common is that they are epic stories, heroic tales that often pits good against evil, greatness against mediocrity. We love those movies and novels, because deep down we want that kind of story too. Well guess what? We are living that kind of story. Live epically.

Leave behind the grave cloths of:

Self-Absorption

Many of us get bound up in the grave-cloths of selfishness. Amy will tell you I can be a pretty self-absorbed person, consumed with thoughts and activities for my own best interest. I know we don't start out that way. I am sure most all of us were taught at an early age the importance of sharing. But in the course of life, we gradually move into a survival mode of sorts. All things, people and events, begin to be shaped or twisted into our own best interest or service.

There is nothing wrong with ambition. But a life self-absorbed is a path towards death.

Resurrection calls on us to live gratefully. The ancient Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart wrote: *"If the only prayer you ever prayed was 'thank you,' that would be enough."* Yes, this is true. Resurrection is gratitude. Thank you Lord for this life. Thank you Lord for presence, when we are hurting. Thank you for grace, when we have made a mess of our lives. Thank you for your mercy, when our own hearts have grown sullen and hard. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 - *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Leave behind the grave cloths of:

Temporal Living

To be honest, a great many of us do live as if this life is all there is: eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. And here I am, not just talking about secular humanists, or agnostics who are afraid to stake a belief. I wonder how many here this morning function as though the only thing that really matters is what we do here and now, even today.

One of the reasons people eat too much, drink too much, satiate all their earthly appetites – whatever it may be – is because there is a belief that this is as good as it gets. They stay wrapped up in their grave cloths if you will and live out their days as part of the walking dead – zombies for themselves or *Zombies for Christ*, but certainly not like the redeemed.

Resurrection reminds us that there is a world yet to come, that this world is not all that there is. There is more, much more. One day we will walk in the Garden again. We will see the ancients – Moses, Peter, Paul, and Jesus. And we will touch the hand of our grandfather and clasp the shoulder of our child. A new heaven and new earth will include all these and more, much more.

One of my favorite theologians, Jurgen Moltmann, wrote: "God weeps with us so that one day we may laugh with him."

John 3:16 – *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.*

John 5:40 - *...come to me to have life.*

John 10:10 - *...I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly.*

John 14:2-3 – *I am going there to prepare a place for you and if I go to prepare a place for you I will come back and take you to be with me."*

John 17:3 - *And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

Resurrection is living – anything else is just the walk of the dead. Cast off the grave cloths.

Happily ever after – that is the familiar story line that God has written for you and me. Let the world throw to us its worst. And I know that for many of us, we walk in the muck and mire of human desperation. Resurrection is the counter-message that God's story is bigger than any other we can ever imagine.