

**“I AM...The Resurrection and the Life”**  
**John 11:17-27**

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Some projects take a long time. But how many of us would have the patience to work on one project for 24 years? Literary scholar Robert Alter has just completed a new translation of the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament. He worked by hand, on paper, with a mechanical pencil. He read and studied the Hebrew, then tried, word by word, chapter by chapter, book by book, to find the best English translation. The result is 3,000 pages and 3 volumes. If you were to read it, one word you won't find is the word "soul." Alter says that the more he studied, the more he came to believe that the original writers made absolutely no distinction between body and soul. When they described what we call the soul, they meant something very physical - something like "life breath." Which is also, as Beau shared two weeks ago, the way that God's name was invoked in those days...with every breath, we breathe in the spirit of God. We aren't people with bodies and souls that are separate from one another, and there is no separation between what is spiritual and what is secular...God is in us and with us, present in all of existence. God is our life force.

God is breath, God is love. These are the images we use to describe the one who is impossible to describe in physical terms. How do you describe the indescribable? How do you tell someone what you felt like when you first fell in love? "I had butterflies in my stomach," we say. "The world seemed like it was more vibrant, more colorful, more alive," we might think. "There was just a feeling in my gut and I knew this

was something real.” We try our best, but some experiences cannot be described in concrete terms.

Has it happened to you...I hope it has...has it happened to you that you've been in this sacred space, or another, and you've been singing a hymn or a worship song or listening to an organ prelude or a choir anthem, and you have felt the presence of God? What do you call that? Goosebumps? Godbumps? Has it happened to you in nature? At church camp? On the lake at sunset, or hiking in the woods, or on the side of a mountain? Something takes your breath away, and not just the physical beauty - although that's part of it. A sense of transcendence, an assurance that there is something beyond us, something magnificent and yet intimate, something - someone - calling your name. It's a spiritual experience, and it's not easy to tell someone else about it.

We don't know exactly who wrote the gospel of John; I'll make things easy by just calling him John this morning. Scholars believe it was written near the end of the first century. We do know this much. This gospel was written for a group of Jewish Christians who were frustrated for two reasons. First, they were frustrated because they had been kicked out of their synagogue. There were Jewish leaders who were compelled by the stories of Jesus, the Christ event, who became Christian. They were still Jewish, but Jews who followed Christ. And then there were Jewish leaders who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. The two factions became more entrenched in their positions and eventually could no longer be a part of the same community. So the Jewish Christians were expelled, excommunicated. The gospel of John is written to that community, but it also seems to be written as if they hope that the other synagogue will overhear its message and become convinced. Something has happened to this group

of Jewish Christians, you see. They can't describe it in any measurable scientific way, but they've been changed. You could say they've fallen in love with this person of Jesus, and they want their friends to feel the same way they do. They want their friends to know that there is a different way to live and think, a way embodied by Jesus of Nazareth.

This group of Jewish Christians is also frustrated because they believed that the coming of Jesus the Christ would signal some sort of dramatic change in their culture, some positive change. Maybe an end to the oppression of the Roman Empire. Maybe better circumstances for those living in poverty. None of that had happened, and some were feeling disappointed, dejected.

They missed their former place of worship, and they weren't sure what the future held. So John writes this gospel, this book of good news, for the purpose of encouraging these Jewish Christians and maybe converting a few others. The author's job is to show, to demonstrate in words why it is that Jesus' life had such an impact. What is it that catches people on fire? What is it that keeps them believing, even in the face of continued persecution? How do you describe it? This author engages his imagination. Walk around our worship display in the entryway and you'll see the images the author finds. Jesus is like a gate that keeps his beloved sheep safe, Jesus is like a light that helps guide and warm people, Jesus is like a vine...there are seven of these "I Am" sayings in the gospel of John.

John is holding up the life of Jesus to a light, the way you hold a prism. Look at Jesus' life from all these different angles. Look at the way God's love and truth shine through his life. Look at the images the prism casts on the wall as it moves. One as-

pect of the life of Jesus is pointed to in our image for today: “I am the resurrection and the life.”

John tells us a story to fit the image. It is a story with remarkable parallels to Jesus’ own death and resurrection story. We’re clearly meant to think about it and remember it, and come to this conclusion...if the power of resurrection and new life were present in the person of Jesus, then that power is available to us, as well. The resurrection wasn’t a one-time event for one person; it is a spiritual power each of us can tap. To make his point, John tells us a story. Imagine that Jesus’ friends Mary and Martha had a brother. And imagine Jesus was very dear friends with him. Let’s call him Lazarus. Now imagine that Lazarus dies, and Jesus does nothing about it until Lazarus has been dead four days. If someone is dead four days, no one can dispute that he was really dead. Finally, after four days Jesus goes to the tomb, opens it, and the dead man comes walking out of it! He’s wrapped in strips of cloth. Jesus says, “Unbind him, set him free.” “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Whether that story really happened doesn’t seem to be the point at all. Every detail of it is exaggerated as if John is saying to us, “Please don’t get hung up on wondering if this literally happened or not...what I’m trying to describe for you is the miraculous transformative power that Jesus’ presence has on our lives. I don’t know else to tell you except through a story.”

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says. “I came that you may have life, and have it more abundantly.” These words point to a way of life that is, in the words of I Timothy, life that is truly life. Life that is not just existence or survival, but thriving.

What God wants for us is a life that is of the same quality as the life of Jesus: a full life, a purposeful life.

And a life of endless new chances and new beginnings. What if we imagine the tomb that Lazarus was in as the kind of boxes or prisons we sometimes find ourselves in? Have you ever found yourself in a job that you would describe as a dead end? Have you ever felt like your bad habits were imprisoning you, keeping you from living in a whole and healthy way?

What if we imagine those grave clothes that Lazarus is wearing as all of the restrictions that hold us back from the life God wants for us? What if those grave clothes are the mistakes you made in your past...and what if you could be set free from them, for good? "Unbind him," Jesus said of Lazarus. "He is now free to experience new life." And so are you. So are all of us.

We are not defined by our past or our mistakes, we are not imprisoned by our old behavior. If anyone is in Christ, we are new creatures. The old has passed away and behold, the new has come.

To everyone on the outside, Katelyn Ohashi's life looked magical. When she was 15, she won the American Cup, the premier elite gymnastics competition. She was on the Olympic track and was called the greatest gymnast in the world. But that arena felt like a tomb to her, and that gymnastics costume was as constricting as grave clothes. She had been injured many times and experienced instances of body-shaming. Now 21, she says that she had lost her love for the sport at age 11. But she has experienced new life. She decided to step off the Olympic track and find a college gymnastics program that was healthier for her, physically and emotionally. She found a

coach she could trust at UCLA. A video of her competing last week has gone viral. For one thing, she scored a perfect 10. One judge even wrote an extra 0 on the score card, giving her 100 because 10 just wasn't enough. What's most appealing, though, is the joy on Ohashi's face. She is a superbly gifted athlete, but now the sport is fun for her again. I challenge you to watch the video and not smile.

What tombs have you been hanging out in? What grave clothes have you been wearing? Are you dragged down by shame, guilt or regret? What would it take to release their hold on you and embrace the transformative power of resurrection and abundant life?

Here's what one commentator has to say about this passage: "Resurrection confronts us as an urgent call, beckoning us to consider the possibility that those whom our world deems socially, physically, spiritually, and emotionally dead might live into a new reality." How can we help each other remove the grave clothes of self-doubt, social isolation, marginalization and oppression? How can we help one another tear away the trappings and wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss and grief, so that all people might walk in dignity and be active participants in a better world?

I want to close by sharing this story from the poet Mary Oliver, one of my favorite writers, who died this week at age 83. It's about her dog. She and her partner inherited a dog named Sammy - he just showed up one day in their yard, a length of chewed-up rope hanging from his collar. The next day, there he was again, with a different chewed-up rope. This happened for several days in a row. One day his owner appeared, with his papers and a leash. Evidently the owner was tired of Sammy chewing through ropes. He simply said, "He's yours." As Sammy got older, he began to roam

the town freely, and would sometimes be caught by the dog officer. He told them they had to put a fence around their yard, so they did, but but they soon learned that not only could Sammy chew through ropes, he could also climb fences. So his roaming continued. All the neighbors knew him and everyone liked him, except the dog officer. But one happy day that dog officer resigned and the new one who took his place was much more tolerant. When he found Sammy out and about he would simply put him in his truck and drive him home. Mary Oliver wrote about Sammy and how he exemplified life in a small town, life that eventually changed and became less personal. But Sammy lived a long and happy life, with many friends. She concludes her little dog essay by writing, "This is a story about life in a small town and the things we miss when the town changes. It's also a story about the wonderful things that may happen if you break the ropes that are holding you."

Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Quotes are from Veronica Miles, writing in [Feasting on the Word](#)