

## **“Love Beyond Death”**

John 11:1-6, 20-27, 38-44; Romans 8:35-39

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Last Sunday, Mary helped us to think about the meaning of death and gave us a better understanding of ‘life after life’ in our Christian faith. As a pastor, I have experienced all aspects of death. But death is still one of the hardest life experiences. It is difficult to find hope when family members are grieving over the loss of their loved one. One day while I was working at UCSF hospital in San Francisco, I experienced a weird feeling between life and death. After I visited a patient in the Transplant Unit, I got another call two hours later from a medical staff person in the same Unit. When I went back to that Unit, I realized that the patient died two hours before. I was between life and death for two hours. A strange feeling possessed me for a while. What does it mean to be a Christian in front of death? Even though we believe that there is heaven after death, what kind of faith should we have in our wrestling with death? Where is hope honestly in facing death? What is our real fear of death? Is it fear of death itself, or the process? Or about our loved ones experience after our death? Whatever it is, people are afraid of death, because they don’t know what will happen after they die. They believe that death will disconnect and destroy everything they are involved in. This morning, I am going to talk about facing death with hope.

Our first Scripture reading is a well-known story. It is the story of Jesus’ raising Lazarus to life. Lazarus was a brother of Mary and Martha. When he was very ill, his sisters asked Jesus to come and heal him, but Jesus came late and Lazarus was dead. But Jesus told his disciples, he is not dead, but he has fallen asleep. He said that he was going to awaken him. As our Scripture says, Jesus raised the dead man. What inspires us and makes this story meaningful? Obviously, the point is not that

Jesus was a CPR expert or medically trained but he could bring the dead to life. Was there a deep and profound spiritual meaning that Jesus wants us to discover? What is it? I want you to circle two words in this story. They are “love” and “believe”. In the beginning of the story, the sisters sent a message to Jesus, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill”. The word, “Love” is the essence and basic understanding of God in the Gospel of John. Jesus loved him and gave him a new life. Even though this event speaks to the revival of Lazarus’ physical life, this is a spiritual metaphor of the gift of eternal life. Furthermore, this event reminds us that Jesus is the source of resurrection and God is in charge of our life and death. When we are in close relationship with God through a chain of love, God will grant us new and eternal life as Jesus gave new life to Lazarus. This gift of eternal life is both for Lazarus and for each of us. The only key to this blessing is to “believe” that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus said to his disciples and us, “Whoever lives and believes in me will never die! Will never die! This special and miraculous gift of God will be given to us when we have faith and belief in Jesus Christ. The purpose of our first scripture reading is to remind us that when we believe and that in believing, we find power, abundant life and eternal life.

In the New Testament, I John 4:16, the Bible says God is love. We understand God as “Love” in relationship with Him. The Love of God, Jesus Christ was hung on the tree and was crucified on our behalf. The love died on the cross and it was for us. I believe this! Death on the cross was the event that shows the power of love winning over the power of death. This concept of death on the cross reminds me of another experience while working at the Transplant Unit. I met a female African American patient who had spine cancer. She was 57 years old. She was diagnosed just 9 months before. When I entered her room, I saw her Bible on a small table. I talked to her to encourage her, saying “It must be a good thing to read the Bible when you feel depressed.” What she responded was that she couldn’t read the Bible any longer, since she lost her vision due to the cancer. When she told me that, I felt so sad and deeply sorry for her. We prayed

together and I sang a song for her. While I was singing that song, tears kept running down her cheeks. Nevertheless she told me that she believed in God and in his love. Even though death was near, she remained strong in her faith and loving God.

Our second Scripture reading describes Paul's confession and his life's situation. He used to be a harsh persecutor and killed many Christians, but now he had become a different person. Now he is facing hardships, distress, famine, peril, and persecution because of Jesus Christ whom he loves. As verse 36 says, his situation is like "being killed all day long". What made his stubborn heart open up and devote the rest of his life to Jesus Christ in the face of so many difficulties? Romans 8:39 gives us a clear answer. Paul says, "nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God." Paul deeply realized what God is through the experience of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus' death was not a mere event of a human being's death, but it was God's death for himself. When Paul heard Jesus' voice, he realized the love of God which is not limited under the power of death. I still remember the woman fighting spine cancer alone. I don't know her situation now, but I believe that she keeps her faith and faces her death with trusting God.

Our world is not forever. In fact, nothing we can experience in the world is everlasting. After we live a certain amount of time, we are supposed to die and then our body will be moved to a different place whether we believe in life after death or not. Nobody wants to live thinking of death, but it is also true that we are destined to die and. Then, our life is like letting off fireworks in the dark sky. We are supposed to die when our time is up. This is how our life goes. But we know that our life is not like fireworks, which go off and then disappear between darkness and darkness. We are Christians who realize the love of God through Jesus Christ and we are deeply connected to the love of God. Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God, even death. Amen.