

July 22, 2018

*"It is Well With My Soul"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 11:1-7, 17-44

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I saw a newspaper article the other day, entitled, "The Worst Possible Greeting." The Worst Possible Greeting. Can any of you guess what it is? Well, it's the one we all say – "Hi! How are you?" Or its equivalent, "Hey, what's up?" Now the author's complaint is that the only "proper" response to this greeting of, "Hi! How are you?" is "I'm fine, thank you," which, at best is really not an answer, and at worst is a dishonest answer. Perhaps that's why John Wesley, the founder of Methodism used a different approach. Many times when he met with people, he would greet them with the more important question, "How is it with your soul?" "How is it with your soul?" Meaning... how was their relationship with God? He would ask them what they did that week that brought them closer to God, and what they did that might have separated themselves from God. And, he expected an honest answer. And so, I want you to ponder that question for a moment. "How is it with your soul?"

This summer we're examining the miracles of Jesus in order to better understand the spiritual truths they can teach us and, of course, how they might affect our soul. Now aside from Jesus' own resurrection, today's miracle has to be one of the most remarkable of all his miracles. And obviously, two thousand years after the fact, I can't prove this miracle really happened. But, in determining the validity of any story, there are subtle little details one looks for, that lend credence to its veracity. And there are so many of those subtle details in this story.

But first let me digress a moment. We've all seen magazines like *House Beautiful* or *Home and Garden*. Typically, the homes they show are so perfect you know that the photo was completely staged. There's a perfectly manicured lawn, the freshest and most colorful fruits displayed in a crystal bowl on an exquisite outdoor table, and beautiful cut flowers in vases sitting here, there, and everywhere. Well, let me tell you, that's far too contrived for me. I mean if you come to my home, or, I might venture to guess, go to most people's homes, you would see things quite differently. The lawn is far from perfect. The exquisite outdoor furniture comes from Christmas Tree Shop. There is no fruit bowl, and the cut flowers come from Stop & Shop if I want to spend the five dollars. And there are even more critical details, like peeling paint, or trim boards that are rotted, or a tear in the screen door. And you see, it's these subtle details that lend credence to the fact that a real family lives here. There are people who have to go to work or are busy volunteering and don't have the time to keep the lawn manicured or tend

to beautiful gardens. There are kids or grandkids who break things. And so let's look at some of those kinds of details in today's miracle story.

You see, St. John could have embellished the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. He could have dragged out how Lazarus died, and what Lazarus said and did after his resurrection, and how he went about the countryside telling everyone how great Jesus Christ was. But it would have been too staged, too contrived for the discerning reader. Instead, we hear details like Martha telling Jesus, "Don't go into the grave because the stench is already strong." Remember, two thousand years ago, there was no embalming of bodies. You put dead people in a tomb, typically a cave that had been carved into the side of the hill, and then rolled a big stone in front of it, to conceal the body and close off the smell as it decomposed. So Martha's comment about the stench is one of those details that tell me Lazarus was dead. Completely, totally, unequivocally, dead.

And here's another thing. When Jesus received the message from Martha and Mary that Lazarus was dying, he waited two days before heading to Bethany from where he was by the Sea of Galilee, which was about a two day journey. So it was a full four days before Jesus got there. Now why did Jesus let four days go by? Well, one theory is that at the time Jewish authorities believed when a person died, their spirit would hover over the body for three days. But on the fourth day, the spirit left the body and the person was considered dead. And that makes sense doesn't it? Because again, back then, they didn't have the medical proficiency to make certain someone was brain-dead. If a person fell unconscious or went into a coma, it was possible that he might be revived in a day or two or three. But after the third day, they gave up, and said he was completely, totally, unequivocally, dead. So again, we see a fine detail as to the reason Jesus took the full four days to go to Lazarus. He knew exactly what he was going to do, raise Lazarus from the dead, and he wanted to make sure the Jewish authorities could not refute the miracle he was going to perform.

Then, at the tomb, Jesus shouts, "Lazarus, come out!" Imagine all those people standing there with bated breath, wondering whether there would be any response to this command. The tension must have been so thick you could cut it with a knife. Can't you see the cynical smiles on the faces of the Pharisees. Or the wonder and hope in the eyes of Martha and Mary. Or the eager anticipation of the disciples as they waited to see if Jesus had power and authority even over death. I don't know about you, but I would be beside myself. "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus came out, wrapped in linen from

head to toe. And then what happens? Jesus simply says, “Unwrap him and let him loose.” It's almost anti-climatic in its straightforwardness, isn't it? There's no “Ta-dah!” No “See, I told you so.” There's just, “Unwrap him and let him loose.” And that's it! It's so understated, so unlike anything we prideful humans might do. It's something only our humble Lord might do. And it's another point that makes the story believable to those of faith because it so perfectly fits the mold of Jesus Christ.

But think for a minute – if the climax of the story is so understated, perhaps the real point of the story lies elsewhere. Consider that this story may not be so much about the actual resurrection of a dead man after all. Perhaps the story is really a commentary on our life here and now. Remember earlier I asked about the condition of our souls – how is our soul in its relationship to God. Well, let's go back to Martha and Mary. You see, for me, the most fascinating part of this story is that both Martha and Mary come face to face with Jesus, at separate times, and yet they make the exact same statement, “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.” “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.” Can you sense perhaps, some latent anger, some bitterness, some exasperation, some hopelessness over Lazarus' death? Can't you just tell it was not well with their souls? And aren't those some of the same feelings we experience in our pain, our sufferings, our uncertainty. “Lord, where were you!” For how many times have we addressed God in that same manner? “Lord if you had only... Lord why didn't you...” There are times in all our lives when we find ourselves in the midst of difficult and troubling situations. There's an illness, a family issue, a job concern, an inner turmoil. And we complain to God, lash out to God – Lord, where were you? Where are you? We feel buried in a tomb of despair, and it is not well with our souls.

But look at how Jesus answers Martha when she comes to him with her “Lord if you had only...” He says to her, “Martha, I am the Resurrection and the Life.” I am - meaning, right now, the Resurrection and the Life. And then he asked Martha, “Do you believe this?” And she answered, “Yes, Lord, I believe.” Now Jesus is promising us two things here. First, the assurance of eternal life, which as Christians is our ultimate joy, but also the promise of his love and caring and comfort in this life here and now. You know, when Jesus saw the people he loved so troubled over Lazarus's death, the Bible said, “He wept.” Imagine Jesus crying. And, I can assure you, Jesus loves you equally as much, and grieves over your situations, and is there to cry with you. But remember, Jesus also promised, “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.” Life abundant – even in the midst of trials and difficulties and uncertainties and death. He said, “Come to me all who are weary and heavy burdened,

and I will give you rest.” “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me.” “My peace I give you.” “These things have I spoken to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full.” “Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be given you.”

These are the promises of Jesus, the miracle worker, who can bring you out of your tomb of despair, and give you new life. Yes, when you put your difficulties and troubles wholly and completely into his hands, I can assure you that he will be there to comfort you, to guide you, to give you peace, and to love you. Do you believe this? Because if you do, if you can turn your life over to God here and now, then, the next time someone greets you with, “How are you?” you can smile and say, “I’m great. Because it is well with my soul.” Amen.