

Getting our Hopes up

Raising Lazarus

Lent 5A John 11:1-45

Slide: Don't get your hopes up

"I wouldn't want to get my hopes up" is a common phrase we humans employ. Our desire to prepare ourselves for the worst-case scenario is something many of us were either taught to avoid disappointment or we just naturally do it to protect ourselves from failure. I remember when I applied to college to Pacific Lutheran University, which was now a long time ago, I remember thinking that I should be realistic and talking myself down, preparing myself for disappointment. Don't get your hopes up, Christine! But I knew those were just words. I very much hoped and had expectations to get into college. I *had* gotten my hopes up. It turned out completely fine of course. That is where I went to college, and I had no problem getting in.

Getting our hopes up is something we don't want to admit we do, even when we do it. And of course, we do! Whether we are waiting for the possibility of a tax refund, awaiting the loan for a house, or seeing if that pregnancy test is really going to see the results we want, to keep ourselves from disappointment, we do indeed say to ourselves that we don't get our hopes up...just in case it doesn't work out. Yet, come on...why can't we admit that we do hope and that we are placing our desires for our lives in what we value? No matter what, we will still be disappointed if it doesn't happen.

I think that it comes down to expectation. Perhaps we do not expect good things to happen, and that when we do expect good things, we just might be putting ourselves out there to be disappointed and hurt. Consider that for some people, many bad things do happen. It can be very difficult to hope when that kind of suffering happens. It can be easy then to not believe it when something good does happen.

Slide: Lord, if you had been here

Mary, Martha, and all the mourners who grieve the death of Lazarus had gotten their hopes up. They expected that Jesus would come in time. He certainly had enough time to get there after hearing of the illness of Lazarus. But, when death had come, they of course succumbed to the natural belief that it was too late. Death was final. Their hope was gone. And you can see that disappointment in them when they see Jesus. No longer did they have any expectations in him at all. And why would they? In those ancient times, there was no belief in the resurrection we know of today. The resurrection was hopeful “maybe” to the people of God. So, death was considered the end. It was a blank.

Yet, if you look at the reading this morning from the perspective of disappointment and resignation, one may be able to imagine Jesus being quite disturbed and upset. Many scholars suggest that Jesus weeps at the grave of Lazarus because he loved Lazarus. That certainly is one interpretation. It’s also an interpretation to say that Jesus weeps because he is compassionate and cares about the grief of Mary and Martha. Jesus is a friend, so that interpretation is understandable.

But I’d like to consider another alternative. If we look deep into our own experiences of grief, of disappointment and hopelessness, another interpretation is there and that is that Jesus may be deeply moved and weeps because the people around him no longer expect anything of God against the enemy of death. That’s it! Death is the end! Why get your hopes up? I mean, the man has been dead for four days and is decomposing already! Really, God can do nothing now, right? If you had been here before, then maybe, but now?

To see the immense hopelessness and grief deeply disturbs and grieves Jesus perhaps because for the entire Gospel of John, Jesus has been trying to show those who follow him that if you have faith in him, if you get your hopes up, you will have life and have life abundantly. Jesus even says it here that HE is the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in him, even though they die, will live!

Here God stands at a tomb where Lazarus lay, and no one has their hopes up. They no longer expect anything from God. Some of them still don't believe it even after Lazarus is brought out of the tomb either. To them, God had no power over the most final thing in life there is: death.

That's why this story about the raising of Lazarus is such an important turning point for those who get their hopes up. The power of God is fully shown here. Here we get a taste of what God does in the face of death, something we need, something that cannot disappoint us. This power is that of resurrection. Jesus stuns them all with that power. They never even expected the power over something so final as the finality of death.

What do you expect? And, when I ask that, what do you expect from God? You see, I think we are no different than those Jesus knew back in the first century. I don't think we expect much from God anymore. In fact, I wonder that we human beings expect God to do much of anything in our lives. I wonder about this anyway. When it comes to the activity of God's power in our lives, down deep, do we really expect God to burst into our lives with promise and hopefulness or do we spend our time preparing ourselves for disappointment just in case? What if God doesn't come through?

What do you expect from God? Nothing? Something? A little bit? For if the only thing we expect from God is something for us only when we die, then why would we bother with a full, active, productive life? If God doesn't have some power in our lives, why would we worship God? Unless...perhaps God is doing something still. Maybe, just maybe, God is acting to bring resurrection to your life.

Slide: Let your hopes...

When it comes to the life of faith, we should burst out the hopes of expectation from a God who promises us resurrection – and we can get our hopes up. We can see that God not only has the power over death, but also in life, in our lives. We can expect our God to have

power in our lives, to work on us, to make us whole, to bring us to healing, and give us meaning, to finding our source of being. Instead of saying “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” we ought to say, “Lord you are here! Now what good thing do we have in store! I know that even now you will do whatever you have power to do!” We can get our hopes up and we should get them up now!

Life is often a disappointment that is true. In fact, I am not telling us here that we should expect no frustrations, failures or disappointments in life. We also know that there are times when giving up is natural. God does not take difficulty away from us. But, if we cease to believe that God has power in our lives and in our deaths, than we will have difficulty living an abundant life of faith. As C.S. Lewis says: **“Life with God Isn't Immunity from Difficulties, but Peace Within Difficulties.”**

Together, let us expect that we have an active God, one who cries at the tomb, one who raises from the dead, one who is the Resurrection and the life, one who grants us purpose and flow in our lives, and not just hope for a God when we die but while we live. If we but trust in God to guide us, we can always expect surprising things to happen, even in our pain and disappointments. Let's stop believing that God can do nothing for us and expect God to be God. Let's get our hopes up again, for in hope, we will be unbound and set free. Amen.