I was well into my adulthood when I realized that resurrection isn't just what happens to us when we die. I don't mean to minimize the promise of our resurrection on the last day. Jesus is indeed preparing a place for us beyond this world, a place that awaits us not based on how well we have lived our lives but on how much God loves us. I know all that and believe it all, sometimes more fervently than others. But it took some times of deep trauma and healing to show me that resurrection is way more than what happens to us when our lives here are over. I've met some ordinary and extraordinary people over the years who have helped me understand that.

When I was a campus minister at the University of South Carolina, one day a young girl walked into our ministry center. She was 12 years old, going on 13. I'll call her Crystal. Crystal was extremely gifted intellectually; she had taken all the coursework her middle and high schools had to offer. Her parents didn't know what to do with her so they enrolled her at a small private women's college where she declared herself a math major.

Somehow Crystal survived that first year. Advisers and professors put their heads together and declared that Crystal was blowing away their little math department. They recommended she go to a larger school, one that would offer her more experiences academically, so she came to USC. The school found the second youngest female student with whom to place her – a 16 year-old who was really glad to get away from home and have some fun. Except for holidays and summer break, Crystal rarely saw her parents, who lived about 45 minutes down the interstate.

When she came to our center, all of us wondered what we were supposed to do with her. As the professionals stood around scratching their heads, the students answered the question for us. They simply loved Crystal. They welcomed her into all our ministry events. They walked her home after evening worship. They gave her rides to the store and had dinner with her on campus. They offered a shoulder when her tears fell. They were all the big sisters and brothers she had never had.

Then came the hard times. The times when she missed having the kind of teenage life her friends back home were having. The times when she became suicidal and we sat with her in her room at the psychiatric hospital, praying to God to help her. The times when she wished her parents would pick her up and take her home and the times she refused to talk to them. Those years were extremely difficult for Crystal; the fact that she lived through them is a true miracle. What she couldn't see at the time was that God was working God's resurrection power in her, holding her up when she felt she was falling into an abyss, shining the light of hope when all she could see was darkness. Crystal kept going; she got her undergraduate degree at 15, before she got her driver's license. She went to graduate school, still with some of her fears and dark thoughts. She made some questionable choices along the way and paid the price for them. The last time I spoke to her, Crystal had finished a post-graduate music program, was playing the organ in a church and was thinking of going to seminary.

Those painful, dark times from years past were not magically erased for Crystal; she carried them with her into her new life because that's what life in this world is like. But with the faith and hope that God has given her, Crystal has persevered. She is a remarkable resurrection story. I've seen others: the young mother whose baby was stillborn, who the day after the funeral tried to dig up the grave with her bare hands. She didn't want to live for a while and things were tough, but God literally pulled her through until she was able to go home and resume her grief as she cared for her older daughter. That's resurrection. I've known resurrection in my own life, as I staggered through the wasteland that follows sexual assault until I finally saw a small flicker of light that would guide me back into life, not life as I'd known it, but new life filled with the grace with which it was given.

Every single one of us bears the pain of the many traumas of our lives, those times we feared we might die or hoped we would. Here's the truth: Jesus knows about our grief and is with us in the middle of it. He brings his resurrection light and life to all who grieve and have lost hope. He is here among us, bearing resurrection not only for the hereafter but for the here and now.

We are lucky that John gives us a perspective that Lazarus' sisters and his friends did not have. When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, his friend Lazarus had been dead for four days. The service had been held, his body anointed with oils and wrapped in cloths. He had placed in a tomb and a rock rolled over the opening. Lazarus' sisters were mired in grief while still tending to a house full of mourners. And the women were angry, angry enough to come meet Jesus on the road before he even got to the house, both of them with the same sharp: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” They knew something about resurrection power and they could not believe that Jesus had not gotten there sooner to resurrect one of his closest friends. After four days, the body was beginning to decompose. What difference could Jesus make by showing up at this late hour? Jesus was patient; he had a short conversation with Martha, in which he told her that her brother would rise again. This was little solace for her; she knew her brother would go be with God later, after he had been dead a while. Martha was understandably confused. She knew about a Messiah coming and about resurrection, but that was what people could forward to when they died. What use was resurrection talk to those living in the here and now? Once the truth had time to sink in, it hit Martha: the Messiah was right in front of her talking resurrection talk and not the kind that happened when we leave this earth.

When Mary ran out and found Jesus, still he was not yet in the town, but gathered outside it with his disiciples. Jesus asked Mary where they had put Lazarus' body. When he saw Mary weep, he began to weep also. I don't think he has stopped weeping for us and for our world since. A small group went to Lazarus' tomb. They watched in wonder as Jesus prayed to God that what he was about to do would show the people around him that God had sent him. The stone covering the tomb was taken away and Jesus told Lazarus to walk out.

This end of the Lazarus story is not, in fact, the end of Lazarus, but a new beginning for him. I wonder how life is different for one who once was dead but now is alive and returned to the same town, with the same family, in the same circumstances. I imagine it's the same for us when we are resurrected in this world. We have our moments of wonder and thanks and then go back to the same life we had before. But hwile we might look the same to everyone else, we are, in fact, different. We are resurrectioin people. We know that if we can be snatched from the mouth of death once, it can happen again. It can happen to others, too, even those whose lives are a tragic mess. (That's most of us at one time or another.) Creation can be resurrected– our waters and our lands and all the creatures God has made can receive new life. The deep divides in our nation can be healed. Injustices all over the world can end and broken lives can be put back together like dry bones in the desert. Our deep hunger for war can turn into new ways of waging peace. All through Christ's resurrection power.

God does not expect us to be passive receivers of God's grace. Notice this: Jesus was not the one to go to resurrected Lazarus and untie the strips of cloth wrapped around him. He could very easily have done that and left the crowd spectators to a wondrous act. Instead, Jesus looked at the crowd and said, “Unbind him and let him go.” That changed everything. Jesus acted through those gathered, making them both recipients and givers of his resurrection power. He engaged their hands, their minds and their hearts, so that they might bring new life to others. Think of what that means. It animates our ELCA tagline, “God's love. Our hands.” It pushes us to speak Jesus' resurrection truth to lies, to actively seek life where there is death, to provide for our neighbors what they need to live new life, too.

Know this, resurrected ones. The same God who breathed into Ezekiel's dry bones also ordered Lazarus out of the tomb and raised Jesus from the dead on Easter morning.

That's great news these hard days, which seem sometimes to knock the life out of us.

Amen.

*Lent 5A*

*April 2, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Church*

*John 11:1-45*