

**The Rev. Luke Selles**  
**The Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields**  
**22 March 2026**

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” In the Name of the One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus’ words today echo across time and space: “I am the resurrection and the life.” These are the opening lines of the funeral liturgy in our Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. As reports of violent deaths continue to crowd our consciousness, we may wonder what those words mean. What does it mean that Jesus *is* the resurrection *and* the life?

The story of Lazarus is found only in the Gospel of John, which we’ve had in large chunks the last few Sundays. Jesus’ “I AM” statement here is the fifth of seven total “I AM” statements, and is the seventh sign in what scholars have called “the Book of Signs,” which comprises the first half of the book. The second half, which follows beginning in chapter 13, is sometimes known as the “Book of Glory” as Jesus prepares for death and then is arrested, interrogated, crucified, and then resurrected.

Immediately before this chapter, Jesus proclaims, “I am the good shepherd” and says that he gives to his sheep “eternal life” so that “they will never perish” because the “Father and I are one.” For this, his listeners start to stone him and some try to arrest him, but the text says, “he escaped their hands,” and flees across the Jordan “to the place where John had been baptizing earlier,” a region called Perea.

So, the backdrop of our story for today is the imminent threat to Jesus’ and his disciples’ lives that hangs over their return from Perea to Judea, the area in and surrounding Jerusalem. Here lies the village of Bethany, just two miles outside of Jerusalem where our story takes place. Jesus arrives during the mourning ceremonies, and because of Bethany’s proximity to Jerusalem, we are told that many “Jews” from Jerusalem come to pay their respects to Martha and Mary who are mourning the loss of their beloved brother. Apparently, these elaborate ceremonies lasted a whole month.

While Jesus is not late to pay his respects, and has risked his and his followers’ lives to come, both Martha and Mary in their separate conversations with Jesus confront him with the line: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Is this true? This line may strike us as odd for a few

reasons. Are Jesus' powers limited spatially? Aren't there other stories where Jesus heals with a word from afar? While this story does not appear in the three other Gospels, other accounts of Jesus bringing people back from death appear. What makes this story stand apart, however, is its placement in the narrative – in John's Gospel this is the “crowning” miracle or sign– and it also illustrates Jesus' loving relationships in a way that helps us see fully. Whether or not Jesus could have healed Lazarus from afar, Martha and Mary, his friends, felt his absence, the absence of a dear friend, teacher, and healer.

So, why did Jesus stay away? We are told that Jesus has delayed on purpose as he prophesies on hearing the news of Lazarus' illness that it “does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” But why would he intentionally delay when it would cause the death of his friend? And what glory does he mean?

In Jewish tradition at the time, the spirit departed the body and decay began to set in on the fourth day – hence Martha's warning to Jesus that there will be a smell when the stone is rolled away from Lazarus' tomb. Jesus' act of power raising Lazarus after four days is a clear sign to the Jews gathered of Jesus' authority over life and death – and we are told that many of those who witnessed Lazarus' rising believed in Jesus, even as a few relay the news to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council led by the high priest. In John's Gospel Lazarus' death and raising is directly tied to Jesus' own death and rising – it is the final sign before Jesus becomes the sign himself.

In spite of Jesus' confidence in Lazarus' raising, the text describes Jesus as “deeply disturbed in Spirit” at the sight of Mary's grief. The Greek here for Mary's weeping is a loud wail: she and her community are grieving a beloved life cut short. And rather than move immediately to his act of resurrection power, we are told, in the shortest verse in Scripture, “Jesus wept.” The Greek here for Jesus' own emotions are powerful – his spirit is disturbed. Jesus has gone to the place where Lazarus lies to mourn him, not just to raise him. The good shepherd has gone into the valley of the shadow of death on behalf of the one sheep whom he loves. And when he calls his sheep by name, “Lazarus, come out,” Lazarus emerges from the tomb, alive, as if the four days, as if the illness that caused his death in the first place, had never happened.

The chief concern of the author of John's Gospel is that we encounter Jesus – not as a character or a doctrine – but as a person, as divine Love made visible, who called his disciples, including Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, his friends. The Greek word used for Jesus' “I am” statements throughout the Gospel are the same translation for the divine name revealed to the prophet Moses in Israel's exodus

out of slavery in Egypt. Jesus is declaring his divinity – that he is one with the “Father,” the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present God – with words, as well as signs. When Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life,” he is correcting Martha’s statement of belief. The life over and beyond death that Jesus offers is not just a future event – it is a present reality.

At the end of John’s Gospel, after Jesus’ resurrection and victory over death, the “last enemy,” he promises to send his Spirit, to guide his followers as they carry on living out his teaching. Jesus, the new creation, who existed before all things and through all things were made, has sent his own Spirit, the very one which has borne our grief, which wept at the death of his friend, to abide wherever there is love in his name, so that we may have life abundantly. To say Jesus is the resurrection and the life is to proclaim the power of God, the power of Love, over death. After being struck down and transformed by Love on the Road to Damascus, Paul who was once Saul declared of Jesus’ victory over death: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Amen.