INTRODUCTION

As I was reading my United Methodist news this week, I came across a story from Asbury United Methodist Church in Huntsville, Alabama. This picture accompanied the story. You see all that green stuff between the people? It's not fresh cut grass or hay. It's 20,000 pounds of green beans. "A farmer harvested the bush beans" two weeks ago, but some were "cut too long or too short," so that he couldn't sell them. So, instead of deeming them unusable and destroying them, the farmer donated them to the Society of St. Andrew gleaning program, which then turned them over to the church. Three hundred volunteers showed up last "Saturday and put the beans in 8-pound bags." Those bags of green beans were then "distributed to local food banks, . . . thrift stores, and other needy causes."¹ Fresh, nutritious vegetables that could have gone to waste, were put to use. What could have been left in the field as to rot was, in a sense, raised from the dead so that the beans could give life to hungry people.

In our gospel reading today from John chapter 11, we see a similar kind of death and life story. Sisters Martha and Mary send a message to Jesus. Their brother Lazarus is very sick. They want Jesus to come and heal him. For a variety of reasons, Jesus doesn't immediately come to the rescue. This delay causes no small amount of anxiety and sorrow. But the delay also gives Jesus a surprising opportunity to show God's glory and power. In the events of John chapter 11, Martha and Mary come to believe in Jesus in a much deeper way. And the gospel story invites us to join the biblical sisters in this faith journey. What might it mean for us to believe Jesus when he says, "I am the resurrection and the life"?
1. RESURRECTION AND LIFE ARE POSSIBLE!

Probably the most obvious meaning behind Jesus' words, "I am the resurrection and the life," is that resurrection and life are possible. Just like when Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the gate," and "I am the good shepherd"--Jesus was making a powerful connection between himself and God.

Jesus was reminding his listeners of how God had spoken to Moses from the burning bush. You recall that, when Moses wanted to know God's name, God simply said, "I am" or "I am who I am." At that particular time and place, God didn't want to be pinned down to anything specific. God didn't want to be confined to something that could be idolized and made by human hands. Getting to know God happens in a relationship over time. If Moses would follow God's call to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses would soon begin learning some things about who God was.

And that's exactly what happened. Moses and his Hebrew people saw that God was a powerful force against the mighty Egyptian Pharaoh. They saw that God had the wherewithal to part the Red Sea. They saw that God had the ability to lead them in the desert wilderness. They experienced that God had the means to provide them manna and quail for their hunger and water for their thirst. When Jesus said, "I am," he meant that the same God who could and did all those things through Moses was also present in Jesus. The God who had the ability to raise the Hebrews out of slavery and give them new life in the Promised Land was still alive and strong. Through Jesus, those whose hope was dead would be blessed with new life.

Of course, Martha and Mary didn't have to rely only on the history of God working through Moses. In their own time, they knew of Jesus' powerful miracles of healing. They knew how Jesus had multiplied the bread and fish to feed the multitude. And they soon witnessed the miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.
Today we don't see things in exactly that same way, but we do see the hands and feet of Jesus working powerfully in our world. When we brought our first-Sunday food for the Cooperative Care Center this morning and put it in the red wagon, we offered life to those whose hunger might otherwise lead to death. When our church deploys a 17-member team for Operation Paintbrush next Saturday, that's sure to bring new life to an old house. When we pray for the sick and transport them to their appointments with medical professionals, we assist Jesus in this mission of resurrection and life. When we go through, what for some is, a difficult transition to a new church schedule, we do it in the hope that renewed strength, vitality, and spiritual life will come. The first step Jesus wants us to take is to become a part of this sacred story. God and Moses and Jesus and Lazarus and Martha and Mary and us. Yes, let's believe! Resurrection and life are possible!

2. NEW LIFE COMES AT A COST

OK. That sounds good in theory. But we also know that new life usually comes at some cost, some pain, some grief. In our gospel story, Lazarus didn't get his new life until after he had died. Martha and Mary didn't get their new, deeper faith until after they had experienced the death of their brother. Along with their sadness, the women apparently also felt frustrated with Jesus for his not being there when they thought he should have been. Anger, abandonment, disappointment, and loss of control are all aspects of grief that are felt quite naturally at times of death. Even if we believe in resurrection, even if that belief gives us hope and joy, death still hurts.

Lazarus' new life came at a high cost to Jesus also. Besides losing a friend that Jesus obviously cared about, in order to go to Lazarus, Jesus had to put himself at great risk. Part of the reason Jesus might have delayed his coming was that the Jewish leaders had just recently tried to stone him. Jesus knew that, if he went back to Judea to help Lazarus, he would draw attention,
trouble, and death. And, in fact, that's what happened. Rev. Chris and I read the story through verse 44. In the remaining verses of chapter 11, we see that Jesus had to go into hiding because the Jewish leaders gave orders to arrest him. As you well know, when Jesus eventually came out of hiding, he was arrested and put to death on the cross.

Resurrection and life are wonderful things. But it's a sad truth that renewal rarely comes without some kind of pain and struggle. It's not easy to be born, and it's often harder to be reborn.

For some members of our congregation, giving up the 11:00 contemporary style worship service is like experiencing a death. That service, which lasted for three years, was in the planning for a lot longer than that. Many of us dreamed and discussed, hoped and prayed, interviewed and planned, implemented and revised, worked and showed up over and over again because we believed so strongly that we needed to do something to bring young people into our Wesley Church. And, our contemporary service was a ministry that met spiritual needs for some folks. But, honestly, it wasn't as successful as we hoped, and that failing has been painful—not just in the loss of a worship hour or a style of music but also in the loss of a dream, the dead end of a vision.

I know most of you here this morning are glad for our new 10:00 worship schedule. To you this feels like a return to what you previously liked. It feels like a restoration, a renewal. And I believe, at this time in our church life, it is the right thing for us to be doing. But I hope that you who are experiencing some resurrection joy will also be sensitive to the fact that this new schedule also comes with pain and loss to others. New life is a high value for us as Christians. But it's worth remembering that resurrection and life come at a cost.

3. R & L REQUIRES US TO STEP OUTSIDE

So, that leads me to a third point. When Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life," he wasn't just returning to Lazarus and family where they were. He wasn't leaving them in their status
Just as he called Lazarus to step out of the tomb, Jesus was also calling Martha and Mary to step outside of their house, outside their village of Bethany, and outside of their familiar Jewish religion. Jesus was calling them to step outside their comfort zones into a new way of faith and life.

Jesus is asking the same thing from us today. If the contemporary worship service wasn't Wesley's answer to new life and vitality for our church, what is? How and where will our spiritual growth come? Will it be that we individually step out of our comfort zone of worship-only and add to that a Sunday School class or small group? Will we let down our guard and become more teachable? Will we step out of our protected space and into mission outreach? Will we open up our insider circle and invite someone new to participate in our ministries? Will it be that we let go of our personal addictions, judgments, and stubborn ways--our inner obsessions--and move outward toward the light of the world that Jesus offers? In all those ways and more, I hope we are able to step outside our box to claim resurrection and life.

CONCLUSION

We don't always know where resurrection and life will take us. As hymn writer Natalie Sleeth reminds us, "In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be/ unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see." We may not be able to see it yet, but God can. And that's reason enough to step out of the tomb of death and embrace the one who said, "I am the resurrection and the life."

1http://blog.al.com/breaking/2012/08/volunteers_bag_up_20000_pounds.html