



Gospel Portraits of Jesus: A Lenten Study

SESSION 6

“I am the Resurrection and the Life” and “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” are two more ways that Jesus spoke of himself in the Gospel of John.

Introduction

In session 3 we focused on four “I am” passages in John where Jesus identified himself as *bread*, *light*, *shepherd*, and *vine*. In this concluding session we turn again to the Gospel of John to focus on two more of the “I am” passages: “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25) and “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6). It is quite appropriate that we focus on these two names of Jesus as we conclude our Lenten journey in anticipation of a great Easter celebration.

There are sixteen passages in John’s Gospel¹ where Jesus spoke of himself in the form of “I am . . .” In the four names we studied in session 3 and the two names in this session, Jesus’ words “I am the . . .” are followed by one or more nouns (bread, light, shepherd, vine, resurrection, and way). In other passages no nouns follow Jesus’ words; rather he declares, “I am.” Examples of Jesus so identifying himself include: when he encountered the woman of Samaria at the well, she spoke of the Messiah coming and Jesus said, “I am he” (John 4:26); when Jesus was walking on the water and said to his frightened disciples, “It is I” (6:20); and when the soldiers went to the garden to arrest Jesus, they said they were looking Jesus of Nazareth and he replied, “I am he” (18:5, 8). In the NRSV there is a footnote to each of these affirmations of Jesus reading, “Gk *I am*,” meaning the original Greek text reads literally, “I am.” As we explore Jesus’ “I am” sayings in this session it is helpful to keep in mind the link Jesus is making between himself and the divine name for God revealed to Moses.



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Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus

Before we move directly to Jesus’ words, “I am the resurrection and the life,” let us consider the context of the words. The sequence of events in the Fourth Gospel is that Jesus and his disciples had been in Jerusalem for the festival of the Dedication (10:22) when a dispute occurred with the religious authorities and he was accused of blasphemy (10:33) for claiming he and God the Father are one. Next, Jesus “went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there” (10:40). There is no indication how long Jesus “remained there.”

The narrative continues in 11:1, “Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.” Jesus told his disciples he planned to go to Judea (where Bethany is located, only a few miles from Jerusalem), but the disciples admonish him, “The Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you

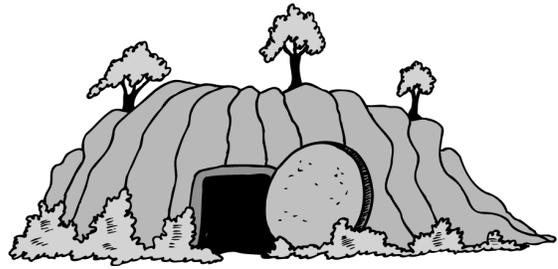
going there again?" (11:8). Jesus was fearless in the face of such threats. Nothing would prevent him from going to his friend Lazarus. When they arrived in Bethany they learned that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Martha heard Jesus was on his way to Bethany and ran to meet him while Mary remained at home. When they met, Martha said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (11:21–22). Jesus assured Martha that Lazarus would rise again and she responded, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (11:24).

In response to Martha's affirmation Jesus declared, "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" (11:25–26). After Jesus asked her, "Do you believe this?" Martha replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (11:27). Jesus revealed to Mary his identity as "the resurrection and the life" before going to Lazarus's tomb. When he went to the tomb he offered a prayer of thanksgiving and then, "he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out" (11:43–44).

I Am the Resurrection and the Life

The Fourth Gospel begins with the affirmation "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1) followed by, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). In addition to being *Word, Rabbi, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, Bread, Light, Shepherd, and Vine*, Jesus identifies himself as "the resurrection and the life" (11:25). The writer uses descriptive titles and names as well as metaphors to identify the nature and mission of the One who is God incarnate, who reveals that death and life are in his hands. In her comments on this passage Gail O'Day writes, "For Jesus to be the resurrection means that physical death has no power over believers; their future is determined by their faith in Jesus, not by their death. For Jesus to be the life means that the believer's present is also determined by Jesus' power for life, experienced as his gift of eternal life."²

Eternal life, from the context of John's Gospel, is life with Jesus that is present now and continues uninter-



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rupted for those who believe. All seventeen verses in John with the phrase "eternal life" affirm that this is a gift from God, with eight of the passages indicating that the gift is a result of "believing" in Jesus.

Resurrection Narratives in the Gospels

As we bring closure to our Lenten journey and prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus it is appropriate that we look at the resurrection narratives in all four Gospels. Though they are the final chapters of each Gospel, these narratives may be seen as the heart of each Gospel. The impetus for writing the Gospels was to give witness to the resurrection of the Lord, to share the Good News that Jesus was who he said he was, "the resurrection and the life." The resurrection narratives are quite different in each Gospel regarding who went to the tomb, what was found when they entered, what they did or said in response to their discovery, and the nature of Jesus' appearances as the Risen Lord.

In Matthew 28 it is Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who go to the tomb, experience an earthquake, and encounter an angel of the Lord who tells them, "(Jesus) is not here; for he has been raised . . . go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead . . . he is going ahead of you to Galilee'" (28:6–7). They left quickly to tell the disciples and on their way encountered the risen Jesus. Matthew concludes with Jesus appearing to the disciples where he commissioned them to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . teaching them. . . . And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19–20).

The Mark 16 narrative is similar in some of the details of Matthew but quite brief. Mary Magdalene, Mary the

mother of James, and Salome were the ones who went to the tomb where they saw that the stone was rolled away and met a young man, dressed in a white robe, who said, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. . . . He has been raised; he is not here. . . . But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee" (16:6–7). The women left in "terror and amazement" and did not say anything to anyone (v. 8). There is a footnote in the NRSV after verse 8 stating that most of the ancient manuscripts of Mark conclude with this verse.

The resurrection narrative in Luke 23 and 24 refers to the "women who had come with him from Galilee" (23:55) as the ones who went to the tomb on the first day of the week. They too found the stone rolled away and when they entered the tomb "suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them . . . the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen'" (24:4–5). When the women told the eleven what they had experienced they thought the words to be "an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb" (24:11–12). Luke continues with two postresurrection appearances of Jesus and his ascension into heaven.

In John's Gospel there are two chapters (20 and 21) devoted to Jesus' resurrection and appearances. John states that first only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. When she discovered the stone had been removed she returned to tell "Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved" (20:2). The two men ran to the tomb, entered and found the grave clothes lying there. The tomb was empty; "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (20:9). The two disciples returned to their homes. Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, then to a gathering of the disciples without Thomas, and then to Thomas and the others. Chapter 20 concludes, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book" (v. 30). Chapter 21 adds an account of seven disciples fishing when Jesus appeared to them from the shore where he had prepared a breakfast of fish and bread (vv. 1–14). The narrative continues with interaction between the risen Jesus and Peter where Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" and he replied each time, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you," which is followed each time with a commis-



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sion from Jesus to "Feed my lambs" (v. 15), "Tend my sheep" (v. 16), and "Feed my sheep" (v. 17).

Even though there are differences among the four Gospels, they all proclaim one reality: the tomb was empty, he was not there, Jesus arose from the dead and appeared before his disciples. The mystery of the resurrection is as difficult for us to believe today, or perhaps more so, as it was for his first disciples. The disciples' responses to the empty tomb were varied. Some were terrified and amazed, while others thought it was an idle tale. Some ran quickly to tell what they had seen and heard, while others did not say anything. Perhaps somewhere in the midst of such responses to the empty tomb and the risen Lord we will find a response that matches our own.

Resurrection in Faith and Life Today

In the Apostles' Creed we affirm, "I believe . . . in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." Every Easter Sunday we hear sermons focused on the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection. Presbyterian liturgical tradition speaks of memorial services as "A Service of Witness to the Resurrection." The life of the person who has been known is celebrated and it is affirmed that life for those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior continues for eternity. This is a mystery we cannot explain with logic or the scientific method. Rather, it is a mystery we leave to God's way and will for all God's beloved children. We trust in God who is Creator of all and in whose providence we live and die.

I think it is a mistake to remember, study, and celebrate Jesus as "the resurrection and the life" **only** at Easter. The truth of this identity of Jesus is relevant for every day of the year. We are an Easter people. We should be living each day with the realization that Jesus is alive in our midst.

I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life

When the disciples gathered to share the Passover meal, Jesus washed their feet as a sign of what he expected of them, and gave them a new commandment “that you love one another” (John 13:34). This is followed by Jesus speaking words that we often hear at funerals or memorial services, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me” (14:1). Jesus continued to speak of his Father’s house with many dwelling places and going to prepare a place for his followers. The disciple Thomas, asked, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (14:5). Jesus responds, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6).

A backdrop for Jesus as “the way” are words from Psalms, with which Jesus was likely familiar: “Teach me your way, O LORD” (27:11) and “Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth” (86:11) and words of the prophet Isaiah, “A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way” (35:8). The fledgling community of believers, before it was called Christian, was referred to as “the Way” (Acts 9:2, 19:9).

These words of Jesus have been used by some as a litmus test to judge whether one is “inside” or “outside” the community of God’s called-out people, the Christian church. It is important to read this declaration of Jesus in the context of the whole passage. Jesus’ “I am” statement is bracketed by “Believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1) and “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (14:10). The larger context is that Jesus is speaking about his relationship with the Father, that he and the Father are one. Therefore, the way for the disciples to be in relation with God the Father was for them to believe in Jesus as “the way,

the truth, and the life.” We misuse the text if we use it to bring judgment upon believers of other faiths.

For us today the best way to come into a relationship of faith and trust in God is to recognize Jesus as the One who shows us the way, reveals to us the truth, and offers us new life, in his name.

Conclusion

The best conclusion for this session and this course is the words of the writer of the Fourth Gospel, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:30–31). In what ways is Jesus the Messiah for our time? What do we believe regarding Jesus as the Son of God? How may we have life in his name?

Thanks be to God for the apostles’ witness to the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus for their day and for ours. **Amen.**

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Gail R. O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9, Luke–John (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 602.
2. *Ibid.*, 688–89.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

After reading the assigned passage for each day, spend some time reflecting on the question related to the passage and meditating on the passage. Select a verse or a phrase to repeat slowly, prayerfully over and over. Or, write the passage down and continue with your own words of reflection and prayer.

Sunday: John 3:1–16

What do you learn from Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus about what it means to believe in Jesus?

Monday: John 5:19–29

Jesus said, "the Son gives life to whomever he wishes." How have you received life from God through Christ, the Son?

Tuesday: John 11:1–44

What do you learn from Martha's relationship and interaction with Jesus?

Wednesday: John 13:1–35

In what ways is washing the disciples' feet at the Passover meal similar to Jesus offering the bread and wine as his body and blood?

Thursday: John 14:1–14

How do you live out your discipleship by following the One who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life?"

Friday: John 20:19–31

Is there anything more that you need to believe that "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God?"

Saturday: John 21:1–19

In what ways do you feel challenged to "feed the sheep" Jesus calls his own? Who are they? What can you do?