The Rev. Paul Scalia began the funeral homily last month for his father, Justice Antonin Scalia, by saying, “We are gathered here because of one man. A man known personally to many of us, known only by reputation to even more; a man loved by many, scorned by others; a man known for great controversy, and for great compassion. That man, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth…”

Over the last six weeks we have come to know this Jesus of Nazareth as “the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Way the Truth and the Life,” and here in the 11th chapter of John we hear Jesus declare, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Looking ahead to the 12th chapter of John we also read, “So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.” (12:10-11). Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, making him an enemy of the state. Talk about tough. You get raised from the dead, and then people want to kill you for it!

To be quite serious, this Gospel story is for those who have to live with death, and that includes all of us. The longer we live, the more we learn that this is true. Sometime between Palm Sunday bedtime and the start of the next day, in a charming upscale brick home in a semi-affluent suburban neighborhood in Louisville, Kentucky an event took place that has rocked the people of that city where my sister lives. For reasons only God may ever know, a husband and father shot his children (ages 5 and 3) while they slept in their beds, shot his wife in the basement of their home, and set the house on fire before turning the gun on himself. Smoke activated the security system and the emergency responders discovered the horrific scene. From all we know, they were the kind of young family we’d be thrilled to see move into the house next door or join our congregation.

I can’t begin to imagine what the extended family is going through or, for that matter, if they were part of a church what their church family is going through. There may have been nothing their family, their friends, or their church could have done to prevent this. Evil can invade our lives without a “signal.” There certainly is nothing better or worse about this one story than about the hundreds of other heinous things that have happened and will happen to people around the world.

From the streets of Brussels to the hidden alleys of every urban center, to lairs of terrorists and beyond, the wrath of the Evil One continues to find a playground in the Lord’s creation—at least for now. But it will not be so forever!

You need to know this—to know the Gospel story of God’s power and passion and life. This is why Jesus’ words and actions matter so much. Perhaps more than ever we desperately need to hear about the living Lord who took upon himself the sin and evil of the world, conquering death itself, because of his inestimable love for you and me—and for the world out there.

We have the power of the Holy Spirit to stare down death itself, but many of us still feel extremely anxious about our lives. Anxious is a word that best describes the state of things when we are nervous, worried, uneasy, or apprehensive. Today’s Scripture, the raising of Lazarus, may have this effect on us as well, especially if we read verse 6 before picking up the story in verse 17. Verse 6 says, “So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days…” Are you listening carefully?
Perhaps you too now feel the tension over Jesus’ overdue arrival at Bethany that the sisters of the dead man, Martha and Mary, felt. Do you see why both sisters greet Jesus with the same thought? “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” This waiting on Jesus created anxiety. And we, like Martha and Mary, want Jesus to speed things up.

We human creatures know a lot about anxiety. We talk about our anxieties. Much of a Christian person’s prayer life is focused upon those things that give us worry or make us anxious. Did you know that an average person’s anxiety is focused on:

a) Things that will never happen (40 percent)
b) Things about the past that can’t be changed (30 percent)
c) Criticism from others, mostly untrue (12 percent)
d) Health, which gets worse with added stress (10 percent)
e) Real problems that will be faced (8 percent)

History is full of stories that reveal the anxiety of people. There is a story about one of Napoleon’s generals, Massena, who appeared with 18,000 soldiers before an Austrian town that had no means of defending itself. The town council met, certain that capitulation was the only answer. The old dean of the church reminded the council that it was Easter, and begged them to hold services as usual and to leave the trouble in God’s hands. They followed his advice. The church bells announced the service. The French soldiers heard the church bells ring and concluded that the Austrian army had come to rescue the town. They broke camp; before the bells had ceased ringing, the French army had vanished. Many of our anxieties never even happen!

One of the greatest problems for most of us is living between life’s dire emergencies and their resolution. Faith can speak to these times. Faith trusts and believes that God reconciles all things. John’s Gospel suggests this by Jesus’ phrase “my hour has not yet come” (2:4). This implies that the time was not yet right for revealing Jesus and his full identity. This revelation will occur, but only when God’s time becomes our time. Most people have difficulty living between moments of urgency and resolution. Times like these make us anxious.

For Martha and Mary, Jesus’ assurance comes from his statement that he is the Resurrection and the Life. This promise is one that they can count on because they know Jesus and trust him. God empowers Jesus to raise Lazarus not so much to resurrect Lazarus, as much to show people who Jesus is. We want Jesus to snap his fingers at the beginning of the story and bring Lazarus back to life. Yet we, like those in Bethany, must allow God to work through the passing of time, human pain, and our own limited understanding to bring about resurrection. This narrative gives us a lot of time to fret because in this account of Jesus raising Lazarus, God we’re shown just how much we need God. The title of the story in most Bibles is “The Raising of Lazarus,” but it could just as easily be called “Waiting for Jesus.”

Waiting for Jesus or waiting for God to work in our lives is never easy. Perhaps we will always be anxious about tomorrow. However, by faith we know God will act—we just don’t know when or how! We must trust in God’s good timing. If we’re not too impatient God gives us lots of time to decide how to address our anxiety. For instance, most of us are tempted to bypass the unpleasantness of Holy Week. It’s
just more appealing to go from Palm Sunday to Easter morning. After all, it’s depressing to hear a recounting of Jesus’ betrayal, suffering, and death. We’d rather keep it positive. But life doesn’t work that way. There are always interruptions to joy. Heartaches happen.

In fact, Easter occurs not in spite of death but because of it. It means that pain, disappointment, and heartache are not final realities. When we can accept the things we cannot change and remain open to God’s power to do new things, we discover what Resurrection truly is.

Rob Fuquay* says, “The way some people talk about Resurrection, I wonder if many times they mean resuscitation instead. The two are very different. Resuscitation means bringing back to life—returning life to the way it was. Resurrection means a whole new life, a different life. I wonder if many times what we really want is resuscitation. We often want God to restore a relationship. We want God to make a boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse come back. We want a job back, an old life back, something back the way it was.

It’s like the joke about what happens when you play a country song in reverse. You get your dog back, your car back, your wife back, your house back, and so forth. Sometimes we want God to play like a broken record—just return everything to the way it used to be!” Resurrection, you see, is not a way of living life in reverse; it’s a way of living full speed ahead into a future made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Many people fear death because they believe death is the end. Bertrand Russell was a 20th century philosopher and an atheist. As he approached his death in 1970, he wrote: “The life of Man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach and where none can tarry long. One by one, as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent Death.” Compare that to the words of Jesus Christ, who said to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

It may make us anxious at times and somewhat nervous, but it is God’s power that saves us—in God’s own time. Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

If you believe this, please stand with me today as we make A Profession of Faith together.

*Some of this sermon is taken from Rob Fuquay’s book, The God We Can Know, © 2014 Upper Room Books