

## ***The Resurrection and the Life***

John 11:1-44 is the narrative about Jesus' bringing his friend Lazarus back from the dead. Jesus prepares to give another sign miracle, this time to reveal himself as the Resurrection and the Life. I'll read only the central portion of this lengthy narrative,

### **John 11:17-27:**

*<sup>17</sup> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup> She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, and the one coming into the world."*

One of Benjamin Franklin's better known quips is recorded in *Poor Richard's Almanac*. In a letter to a Frenchman in 1789, Franklin said,

"Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."

Death is indeed certain, yet we are still not reconciled to it. I recall studying in college a philosophy course on existentialism. We read books and plays by writers such as the Frenchmen Sartre and Camus, who both determined that life is meaningless, sounding much like the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, which gives the perspective of life and death "under the sun," i.e., apart from the perspective of faith and hope. Life has no meaning, said these writers, and the fact that renders any life philosophy as meaningless and absurd is the reality and inevitability of death. In Moses' psalm, we're reminded of the frailty and brevity of mortal life, and exhorted to "number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (90:10, 12). Human life can never be reconciled to death. We're created in the image of God, who made us to live forever. The sin of our first parents condemned us to mortality.

Ours is a death-denying culture, with medicines, medical treatments, diet and physical fitness that promise to prolong life, and surgery and cosmetics that hide the signs of aging. On the other hand, the Bible faces death squarely in the face, saying it's the last enemy we'll ever face (1 Cor.15:26). Death is the result of sin.

The reason for the cross and resurrection of the Son of God is to rescue God's people from the "wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23), that we might spend eternity with God in the new heaven and earth. But even the believer, who's been redeemed from sin's punishment, must nevertheless face the reality of the end of mortal life.

Messengers came from Martha and Mary from Bethany to the region across the Jordan to tell Jesus Lazarus, the one Jesus loved, was sick. We read that Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus, "Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days" (6). To us, it would seem to make more sense if the text read like this: "Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus. So when he heard Lazarus was sick he left immediately to go to them." But that's not what it says.

One of the hardest things for us to accept is that God's ways, including even his timing, are higher than ours, and cannot be understood or easily accepted (Is. 55:8-9). Although he knew Martha and Mary would suffer anxiety and even grief, Jesus delayed in responding to their cry for help because of his love, not because of his indifference. He had the "long look," and could see that his delay would result in a greater work and in greater faith for Martha and Mary.

Ken Myers, producer of the Mars Hill Ministry out of Chicago, was returning to his home on a flight that landed at O'Hare Airport. As the plane approached the runway, he noted how auto traffic had come to a halt on the freeway out of O'Hare. Motorists were getting out of their cars to try to see what had stopped traffic. Ken could see ahead and noted red emergency lights. He noticed the auto accident had by this time been cleared, and knew that the flow of traffic would soon be restored. So he knew that by the time he got his car out of the parking garage, the way would be clear.

In the same way, God sees what we can't see from here below. He knows our past, present and future, and he sees our lives "from above." When he delays in what we think he should do, we, like Martha and Mary, become anxious. That's because we don't have his divine perspective. When we think God has forgotten us when loved ones suffer or other prayers seem unanswered, God is working behind the scenes. Sometimes he's working to teach us to trust in him and not to use him as an immediate "pain reliever." In our culture that expects immediate results, and thinks we have a right to be pain and trouble free, delays are intolerable. Yet, as is true in our text, Jesus has a purpose in his delays. Jesus waited till all vain human hopes were gone. In the view of the culture of the time, the spirit of the deceased hovered over the body for three days, hoping to be reunited with the resuscitated body. But on the fourth day, when the decomposition of the body set in, the spirit finally departed. So Jesus waited until four days had expired. Death was a definite reality.

As Christians, we're not to deny the reality of death, but are to realize our loved ones have gone, and there's no hope of bringing them back to us in this mortal

life. Funerals are to be occasions for grief and for facing the reality of death. Christian funerals have the hope for the resurrection, and the Apostle Paul said we grieve, but not like those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). But we grieve. People who have experienced the loss of a loved one are painfully aware that someone has been taken from them for the rest of their mortal lives, and some things will therefore never be the same again.

Attending the funeral of my brother-in-law last year, I was dismayed to hear the eulogists and ministers ignore the reality of the grief that my sister and her family were experiencing and would continue to experience in the days ahead. It was as though those who suffered the loss of a good husband, father and grandfather were to think and act as though Lynn had gone only on a short vacation to Hawaii. From the sound of the remarks, the family should have felt guilty for grieving.

Death is real, and so we grieve. But also our faith is real. Jesus delayed coming to Bethany until his friend Lazarus had died because he had a design. He knew this experience would be an opportunity for his disciples, including Martha and Mary, to put genuine faith in him. He knew that in the end God would be glorified in that his followers would have a greater awareness of and appreciation for his power, holiness and love. He realized that as they came to the end of themselves and faced their human helplessness before the enemy called death, they would learn to trust in and depend on him. Jesus was willing to let those he loved suffer pain and sorrow and even fear in order to learn to trust in him as the one who conquers all, including death.

Jesus came at the right time. It may well be that as you face the death of a loved one, or as you contemplate the inevitability of your own death, you'll seize the opportune moment to believe in Jesus. He gives the opportunity for faith. Jesus' opportune moments intersect with our opportunities to place our faith in him. He'll come to you in his divinely appointed time. It's never too soon or too late when Jesus comes. He comes when you are, like Martha and Mary, at the end of yourself. You cannot handle the problems of life. Certainly we cannot handle this last enemy who renders the strongest and most brilliant of men and women helpless at the last.

Jesus came with his disciples to Bethany near Jerusalem, where he was met by many professional mourners as well as family friends. Martha spoke truth when she said that if Jesus, her Lord, had been there, Lazarus would not have died. She also expressed her faith in the power of Jesus' prayers to ask the Father for a miracle for her deceased brother. Jesus assured her that her brother would rise again. She affirmed her faith that he would rise at the last day. Jesus declared, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who *believes* in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and *believes* in me will never die. Do you *believe* this?" Jesus is gave Martha an offer of placing her faith in *him* as the Resurrection and the Life.

Jesus makes this claim also because of what he is about to do in nearby Jerusalem, actually on the outskirts of the city in a place called Golgotha. Jesus, the eternal and sinless Son of God will be arrested on trumped up charges and then mockingly tried and cruelly crucified. But he will not be a victim. He will give himself to die according the eternal plan of the Father. He will die as he had already been introduced to his disciples by John the Baptist, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (1:29). He will be raised *Cristus Victor*, giving us the power for our salvation, and for the gift of our eternal life.

Martha seemed to be giving a theological answer she may have learned from childhood (24). Perhaps she said what she was taught to say, and yet had no peace from personal conviction. Jesus was offering her faith in him as a person, as the personal Son of God, the Resurrection and the Life. Instead of a theoretical or theological assent to truth, Martha needed a living faith in the person of Jesus, who was making the claim to be the Resurrection and the Life. Martha seemed to accept his claims with great understanding and acceptance as she made a confession of faith (27). But perhaps Martha's faith was still a bit academic and objectively removed from her experience. She needed to see Jesus at work in her life as the Resurrection and the Life.

The sisters of Lazarus said that had Jesus been there, their brother would not have died. That's true. But there was a sense in which Jesus knew all about them, and was there with them when their brother died. In our times of greatest need and direst testing, Jesus is with us. And he wants us to believe in him, even in the void of evidence, and when he seems silent or absent from us. The Resurrection and the Life gives the opportunity and the offer of faith in him, and not in theory or second-hand evidence.

Jesus quietly sobbed and wept tears of compassion as our sympathetic great High Priest (35; Heb. 4:14-15). He feels with us. He hates sorrow, what death brings to our hearts. He feels with us. He fully understands and stands alongside us in our sorrow. He himself wept because of the pain the death of Lazarus caused in the hearts of Martha and Mary.

But Jesus was also disturbed and perhaps even angry because of the unbelief of those who refused and who would continue to refuse to believe in Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life. Some unbelievers, rather than being convinced by this spectacular miracle, became more intense in their efforts to destroy Jesus (46). Jesus likely wept because he knows what sin will do eventually and eternally to the unrepentant sinner and the unconvinced unbeliever.

Lazarus was miraculously brought back to life, yet he nevertheless lived out his mortal life and died again. But those of us, who have heard the word of faith and have responded in faith and repentance, have been born again. When our mortal bodies die we'll immediately see Jesus. We'll be absent from the body

and present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). We have the promise that these decaying bodies of ours will be raised as immortal bodies, like the body of the risen Lord Jesus. We're given eternal life now and forever.

In typical ancient burial fashion, Lazarus' body had been wrapped in grave cloths and linen wrappings. His body was bound to the degree that he could only hop off the shelf in the side of the cave and then struggle to the mouth of the cave that had been uncovered with the removal of the large stone. Now Jesus commanded that he be liberated from the binding grave clothes. In the same way, Jesus sets us free from our bondage to the fear of death and to whatever might restrict our living life to the full.

In a way, I've seen the story of the raising of Lazarus repeated again and again. As a pastor I've had the privilege of being at the bedside of those nearing mortal death. Only the gift of eternal life and the presence of the risen Christ could give such peace and even joy to those believers who are already looking at heaven's gate. My mother, according to my sister who was at her bedside, spoke of hearing angelic music and voices welcoming her into Paradise. John Wesley said of those in his Methodist societies, "Our people die well." When we live well, by faith with a growing relationship that gives hope and peace, we then die well. The aged or decaying, diseased body has become a hindrance, just as were the strips of grave cloth wrapped around Lazarus, whom Jesus called from death back to life.

When the time appointed for our death comes, Jesus will say, "Unbind (them) and let (them) go!"