



Catalog No. 1371

John 11:17-44

Thirty-third Message

John Hanneman

June 18th, 2006

DEATH THAT LEADS TO LIFE

In chapter 11 of the gospel of John we learn that Jesus had some very dear friends, Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary. Lazarus became very ill and died. Jesus chose to be absent and not prevent Lazarus's death. It seems there was something to be gained by his absence that could not be gained by his presence. According to Jesus, Lazarus's death was for the glory of God. But how could something so devastating as this young man's death be used for the glory of God? The Lazarus story in John 11 teaches us many things about the absence, compassion and power of God.

We have already looked at the first part of the Lazarus story, covering the time when Jesus was in Bethany beyond the Jordan, near the Sea of Galilee. In 11:17, the account moves from Galilee to Judea, near Jerusalem, as Jesus arrives at the village of Lazarus and his sisters.

So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother. Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house. Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." (John 11:17-22 NASB)

Hearing that Lazarus was sick, Jesus did not leave for Bethany immediately. He waited until Lazarus had died, and then set out. The journey took four days, so that when Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days.

We learn that Bethany was near Jerusalem, and that many of the Jews had come to comfort the family, indicating the prominence of this household. The village's proximity to Jerusalem meant that Jesus was putting himself in danger, but it also meant that many people would be on hand to see and report on Jesus' climactic sign.

Martha, apparently bolder than Mary, goes out to meet Jesus, perhaps to have a private conversation. She affirms her faith by saying that if Jesus had been there, he could have saved Lazarus. This is not necessarily a criticism or rebuke of Jesus. Martha also affirms that even now, whatever Jesus asks, God will give. She is not asking Jesus to raise Lazarus. Her statement is an indication that her confidence in him has not diminished.

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world." (11:23-27)

Jesus tells Martha that her brother will rise again. On one level, these are words of comfort and solace. This is how Martha takes them, for she says, "I know there will be a resurrection on the last day." The resurrection on the last day has already been mentioned in John 5 and 6 (5:21, 25-29; 6:39-40). The Pharisees believed in the resurrection, while the Sadducees did not. But on another level, Jesus is promising a more immediate resurrection.

Jesus then tells Martha that he is the resurrection and the life. This is the fifth of seven "I am" statements in John's gospel that has a predicate: the bread of life, the light of the world, the door of the sheep, the good shepherd, and here in chapter 11, "the resurrection and life." Martha already believes in the resurrection that will come on the last day, but now Jesus reveals that he in himself is the resurrection and the life. Martha's focus is being diverted from an abstract idea to a personal belief in the one who can provide the resurrection. Jesus not only gives the bread from heaven (6:27), he is the bread of life (6:35). He not only raises the dead on the last day (5:21, 25), but is himself the resurrection and the life.

What is resurrection and what is life? Are they the same thing or are they different? Jesus defines what he means by these words with what follows. Resurrection means that the one who believes in Jesus will live even if he dies. This refers to the final resurrection, the one that Martha knew about. Life means that everyone who lives and believes in Jesus will never die. This life is the life of God – saving life, eternal life, the life of the kingdom.

The life Jesus gives is independent of any external arrangement of eggs or marbles. It is the internal change that takes place when one believes. God breathes his Spirit into the heart of an individual, resulting in an immediate and permanent quality of living not attainable in the world. Eternal life is more than post-resurrection life; it is a life that begins in the present and never dies. Ordinary, mortal life ebbs away, but the life that Jesus gives never ends. Jesus doesn't just give us

bread and water and light; he is life and he gives life. This is an amazing statement.

Jesus poses a question to Martha: “Do you believe this?” He is asking her if her faith can go beyond the confidence of believing that her brother will be resurrected at the last day to a more personal trust in Jesus as the resurrection and life. Martha responds by affirming Jesus as the Christ (1:41), as the Son of God (1:49), and as the one who comes into the world (1:9, 6:14). Martha’s confession is not mere repetition or pious jargon. She knows Jesus as a powerful intercessor. But we will discover that she has a distance to go.

Jesus’ absence is meant to do something that his presence could not accomplish. When Jesus delayed and failed to prevent Lazarus’s death, Martha was faced with deeper realities and deeper questions about what she believed. Death and tragedy force all of us to ask these questions. So when Jesus came to Bethany he could be present in a new and different way.

We always feel that being present is more valuable than being absent. But that is not really true. Think about your children. You work hard at being present with them – helping them succeed, dreading the terrible things that might happen to them and trying to prevent that at all costs. But as your children grow you realize they have to discover life on their own. When they leave home you are forced to be absent. If you were present with them, you would try and keep their world from getting messy, but in your absence something more valuable happens. Your children must determine for themselves what they believe. Will Jesus become their source of life?

As ministers of Jesus Christ we find the same thing to be true. Our presence in people’s lives is good, but our absence is as well. We bring a reminder of Jesus, but oftentimes it is in our absence that people find Jesus as the resurrection and the life. During the Christmas of 1981, my mother-in-law came to Christ, not because our family was present but because we were absent, away for the holidays. It was in our absence and her aloneness that she looked to Jesus for life.

Many times in my life I have wanted someone to help me through difficult things. But I have come to realize that this only forces me to go to Jesus for life, despite the circumstances. My most difficult times have been the holiest times of experiencing Jesus alone as the resurrection and the life. Jesus gives life even in the midst of death. And each of us has to answer the question for ourselves: Do we believe this?

When she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she got up quickly and was coming to Him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Therefore, when Mary

came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” (11:28-32)

Martha leaves Jesus and calls Mary, but Jesus remains outside Bethany. He wants privacy, not protection from his enemies. He knows that when he raises Lazarus, word will spread.

When Mary meets Jesus, the crowd follows her. Perhaps Mary is more popular than Martha. The crowds think Jesus is going to the tomb to weep. It was customary for even a poor family to hire at least two flute players and a professional wailing woman for the purpose of mourning.

The tomb is the anti-temple that celebrates the power of death. Mary does not go to the tomb but to the new temple, the embodiment of life. Life is contrasted with death. Mary falls at Jesus’ feet, indicating that she is more emotional than Martha. She says the same thing as her sister, and wishes that Jesus had come earlier to prevent the death of her brother.

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, and said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. So the Jews were saying, “See how He loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?” (11:33-37)

Observing Mary’s reaction, Jesus is deeply moved and troubled in spirit. “Deeply moved” refers to the snorting of horses, suggesting anger, outrage or emotional indignation. The word “spirit” means an inward reaction and is equivalent to “in himself.” “Troubled” means to stir up, to disturb. Jesus was also troubled in 12:17 and 13:21. In other words, Jesus was visibly agitated and outraged.

Why was that? Jesus sees right before his eyes the pain and sorrow caused by death, sickness and sin. He is angered by that, because this is not the way things were supposed to be. This was never what God intended for his creation. God is like a parent who is outraged at the effects of sin and death in his children’s lives.

But outrage is not Jesus’ only emotion. He also weeps, although the word used here is different from the word used of the weeping of Mary and the Jews. The world that is at enmity with God is also the object of God’s love. Jesus utters his woes against Jerusalem in Matthew 23, but grieves over the city as well. This too is part of God’s response to death. God is like a parent who cries as he watches his children in pain. The same sin and death that prompted his outrage also generates his grief. “Grief and compassion without outrage reduce (our response to death) to mere sentiment, while outrage without grief hardens into self-righteous arrogance.”¹

The people are confused by Jesus’ response. Some see his love for Lazarus, while others remember the man born blind and wonder why Jesus allowed Lazarus to die. This is unbelief,

since their faith does not rest on Jesus and what he has revealed of the Father, but on displays of power. Such faith constantly demands new signs and new miracles. Jesus is also outraged at this unbelief.

Etched in my memory is the morning five-and-a-half years ago when I received a call from my good friend Pat Harrison telling me that his wife Anne had died tragically and suddenly. When my wife returned home later that morning and saw the look on my face, she asked what was wrong. Upon hearing the news, she fell to the floor and screamed, “What are you saying?” “What are you saying?” Then she burst into tears. For me, that is a picture of Jesus’ response to pain and death – outrage, agitation and grief.

The interaction with Mary not only highlights the fact that Jesus did not prevent Lazarus’ death, it also reveals the compassion of Jesus and the heart of God. Death is the common enemy which all humanity shares. Jesus recognizes death for what it is and sees the pain and suffering it brings. He doesn’t use some Christian cliché, saying that Lazarus is with the Lord or that he is in a better place. Our God suffers with his people. Jesus can speak to the enemy that unites us all no matter who we are.

We always want God to comfort our hearts and shower us with his compassion, but perhaps it is God who needs our compassion. As he watches his beautiful creation suffer through sin and death, his heart breaks. As Jeremiah wept over Jerusalem, so our God sits alone and weeps. As God sees the opportunity for belief turn to unbelief, and the offer of true life rejected by people he loves, he experiences outrage and grief. God loves, God cares, and God hurts. But then, God also gives life.

So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, *came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.” (11:38-39)

The tomb of Lazarus was a cave. Many Jews buried their dead in caves, either a natural opening or one cut out of the rock. Such tombs could be vertical or horizontal and were usually sealed by a stone. Lazarus’ tomb became so important that a church was built over it.

The drama centers on the person of Martha. Jesus had asked her if she believed he was the resurrection and the life. She said she believed. So now Jesus says, “take away the stone.” Martha responds, “But it stinks.” The fear of the stench of decomposition indicates that the body was not embalmed. Aromatic spices were used not to embalm but to counteract repulsive odors. Martha clearly did not understand the earlier conversation that indicated Jesus was going to raise her brother. She believed but didn’t believe. She had not yet grasped that Jesus was life itself.

Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, “Father, I thank You

that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me.” (11:40-42)

Jesus reiterates the promise that they will see the glory of God if they believe. The stone is taken away and Jesus prays. Addressing God as his Father is characteristic of his prayers. The prayer assumes that Jesus has already asked for Lazarus’ life and all he has to do is thank the Father. Jesus prays loudly so that all can hear. The prayer is public, not because he wants to play to the gallery, but to draw people into the intimacy that he has with his Father and reinforce the fact that he does nothing on his own; he acts in total dependence on the Father. This is the path to life and the defeat of death.

When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” (11:43-44)

Jesus speaks out and Lazarus comes out. This anticipates the last day, when the dead shall hear the voice of Jesus and all will rise. Some say that if Jesus had not specified the name Lazarus, all of the tombs would have emptied. We can read this in the light of the prologue. Jesus is the word that brought creation into being, and he is the same word that speaks outside the tomb and raises the dead. All of this happened in the village, not in Jerusalem. This is where resurrection and life come, in the midst of humdrum, everyday life.

Jesus commands that Lazarus be unbound. Upon death, typically the corpse was laid on a linen sheet that was twice the length of the body, with half the sheet underneath and half on top. The feet were bound at the ankles. The arms were tied to the body with linen strips and the face was bound with another cloth. Lazarus could hop and shuffle, but hardly walk.

The resurrection of Lazarus foreshadows the resurrection of Jesus, but they are different. In Jesus’ case, the linen strips were still lying in the tomb, and the headpiece, the soudarion, was neatly folded by itself. Lazarus was called to a restoration of a mortal life. He would face death again. Jesus was a “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15). Lazarus was a pale anticipation of what was yet to come.

I will conclude this morning with three thoughts.

1. The first thought brings me back to Jesus’ penetrating question: Do you believe that he is the resurrection and the life? Perhaps you are hearing the Scripture this morning, but you have never believed in Jesus. If you are looking for life, then I invite you to embrace Jesus, to open your hands and confess that the death of Jesus on the cross is for your sin and that his resurrection will give you eternal life.

Or perhaps you are like Martha. You confess Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, but have yet to experience his resurrection life. Do you believe that Jesus can give you life when all you see is death? Are you willing to roll away the stone, or

do you just say, life stinks. "In that hour of darkness new light was seen. While death was witnessed, life was affirmed. Where God's absence was most loudly expressed, God's presence was most profoundly revealed."²

In the story of Jesus and Lazarus, the people obeyed and took away the stone. This is what faith is all about. In the midst of tears and weeping, we just follow. Faith does not mean we will not feel pain, weakness or brokenness. Faith does not mean that we have to understand or that we keep a stiff upper lip. Faith means that in spite of death we believe that God can work and give life. There is a death that leads to life and reveals the glory of God. God will raise us up on the last day, but he can also raise us up today. Maybe you need that life today. Look at the face of Jesus and receive the life that you need and long for. If we truly believe in resurrection life, then that belief affects everything we do.

2. This story makes a powerful statement about sin and death. God wants to release us from this bondage. Christ set us free from the power of sin and death. He wants to set us free from the tomb that enslaves us. He is the word that calls us forth.

Where do you experience death in your life? What stone is God asking you to roll away? Can you hear his command to arise, come out of the tomb and walk in newness of life? Sometimes we choose to remain in death and enslavement because we are mad at God or we are too proud or too stubborn. Sometimes we are scared to leave the only thing we know, or we refuse to receive the life which God offers instead of the life we want. The story asks us to make a choice between life and death. Do we want the tomb or the temple?

3. This story gives us assurance and hope of a glorious future. No matter what is happening today, no matter how hard the road, we believe by faith that it is leading to somewhere and something beyond our wildest dreams. God is committed to us and God will bring us home. Let us not lose heart or grow discouraged. God's creation will one day be what he intended.

Listen to these wise words from Frederick Buechner as we close:

Unlike the great oriental religions, Christianity takes death very seriously, which is of course why it also takes life very seriously, why there is such urgency about living it right and living it now. In the New Testament there is no doctrine of endless rebirths on the great wheel of life, no doctrine of a soul which by its nature cannot die. On the contrary, by our nature we do die, as Christianity sees it, with our bodies and souls as inextricably one in death as they are in life.

If death is the end in Christianity, it is not the final end; it is the end of an act only, not the end of the drama. Once before out of the abyss of the unborn, the uncreated, the not-yet, you and I who from all eternity had been nothing became something. Out of nonbeing we emerged into being. And what Jesus promises is resurrection, which means that once again this miracle will happen, and out of death will come another realm of life. Not because by our nature there is part of us that does not die, but because by God's nature he will not let even death separate us from him finally. Because he loves us. In love he made us and in love he will mend us. In love he will have us his true sons before he is through, and in order to do that, one life is not enough, God knows.³

1 D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 416.

2 *Seeds of Hope, A Henri Nouwen Reader*, Edited by Robert Durback (Doubleday: Image Books), 126.

3 Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1969), 77-78.