



HOW TO CONQUER DEATH

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 11:17-46

24th Message

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Death, someone has said, is still the only certainty in this life. It's possible to evade the IRS, but no one eludes the Grim Reaper.

Death is a brutal fact of life. We spend our entire lives working for something and then we die. Our bodies wind down; time runs out. I was reminded of this last week as I was leaning against a wall, catching my breath, after playing a game of basketball with some college students. It was C.S. Lewis who said, "the disease of our temporality is incurable."

But we don't like to talk about death, do we? We try to prove the Grim Reaper wrong. We jog. We diet. We avoid cholesterol. We eat oat bran muffins every day. But at best, we will end up a healthy-looking corpse. No one, as they say, gets out of this life alive. George Bernard Shaw noted, "the statistics on death are very impressive: one out of every one people die."

Some try not to think much about dying, or if they do, they think superficially about it. I read that a friend of C.S. Lewis' wife said she never worried much about death because, as she put it, when she got to that stage "science will have done something about it." But the book of Ecclesiastes warns that there is more reality at a funeral than there is at a party. A funeral makes people face facts, at least. It confronts them with the way things really are. The overall effect of a funeral therefore can be positive because people have to face reality.

We ought then to take death seriously, to face the inevitability of our dying and deal with it. Death must be reckoned with anyway in the end. Facing it is, in fact, an excellent thing if that will influence us to look for an answer to it.

Our text this morning from the gospel of John, the account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, suggests the only sure answer to the problem death. This a factual account by an eyewitness, John himself, who testifies to Jesus' ability to reverse the results of death.

The raising of Lazarus was the last and most conclusive of the "signs" that Jesus did. As we have already learned, the miracles were evidences that Jesus was the Messiah. John reports that our Lord did many signs, but the carefully selected miracles reported in his gospel were written to lead people to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. The Jews believed that when Messiah came he would raise the dead. When John the Baptist asked for proofs that Jesus was indeed the promised one, our Lord replied that the "blind receive sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up..." (Matt.11:5a). That the dead were raised up was the final and irrefutable proof that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

Jesus was in Transjordan, near the site of John's baptism, when he received word that Lazarus was sick in Bethany. But he delayed two days before traveling to see him. As we were reminded in our last study, God may not rush to our rescue and deliver us from suffering. He may delay, but his delays are purposeful: they are for our good.

The story centers around a family in Bethany: Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. As we have seen, Jesus was very close to this family. From verse 17 on, the story is told in three movements, each of which involves one of these three family members. In the first movement, Martha's faith is challenged (17-29); in the second, Mary's grief is shared (30-37); while in the third, Lazarus' life is restored (38-44).

We pick up the story today in verse 17.

So when Jesus came, He found that he [Lazarus] 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.

Before we look at the characters involved here, we can make two observations. First, Lazarus was dead. He was not comatose; he was stone cold dead. He had been dead for four days, in fact. The body probably had been partially embalmed already. Second, Bethany was quite near Jerusalem (they were two miles apart); thus it was easy for a large number of Jerusalemites to gather there to console the family. This miracle was for them, these prominent, pious Jews who never took Jesus' works seriously.

Verse 20:

Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him; but Mary still sat in the house. Martha therefore 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." Jesus said to her, "Your brother shall 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 shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall 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."

John shines the spotlight on Martha first. (We will recognize the personalities of both sisters again in this setting.) Hearing that Jesus was on his way, Martha left the mourners and went out to meet him. This was characteristic of her, for Martha was a woman of action. (Mary, the retiring one, waited at home.) Martha greeted Jesus with words that must have been on her lips when Lazarus was sick. How

many times she must have said, "Oh, if Jesus were only here!" These words immediately came to her when she saw Jesus: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

Martha usually said what was on her mind. I believe there was confusion and a trace of anger in her question. She was certain Jesus would have healed Lazarus had he been there, for she went on to say that God always answered his prayers. Have you ever felt as Martha did? "Lord, where were you? Where were you when my loved one died? Where were you when my marriage fell apart? Where were you when my father became an alcoholic? Where were you when my child went astray?" Martha's words eloquently expressed her grief. Her heart, stirred to its very depths, was teetering between grief and hope. But her faith was intact, for she continued, "*even now* I know God will give you what you ask."

I don't think it occurred to her that Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead there and then. Clearly, her expectation was that her brother would be raised in the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. The "end of the age" is the end of human history, when the dead will be raised. Most of the Jews believed in this resurrection. The notion of a general resurrection is imbedded in the Old Testament (Psalm 49:14,15; 56:13; 73:23,24, Isa.11:10; 26:6,19; 53:11; Job 33:29). (The Sadducees were the exception. The OT scholar, Walter Kaiser, said this was what gave them their name: it made them "sad, you see"!) Martha was confident in her brother's future resurrection. Her theology was accurate. But Jesus wanted to shift her focus from the program of God to the person of God, from an abstract belief in what would happen on the last day to a personalized belief in the one who would make it happen.

Though terse, Jesus' answer is pregnant with meaning. His sixth "I am" claim here is the most significant statement in the NT for defining the Christian view of the resurrection. With respect to the issue of death, it is, in fact, the most significant statement ever uttered. In it we come to the end of our search for an answer to the problem of death. Jesus said: "I myself am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall never die even if he lives, and everyone who is living and believing in me shall never (ever) die unto the ages. Do you believe this?"

If you believe this, you have solved the problem of your death.

Understand what Jesus was saying. First, he affirmed that those who have believed in him and died were alive — more alive than they had ever been in life. Jesus put it this way: "He who believes in me shall live even if he dies." He will pass from this scene. To all appearances it will look like death, but there will be no darkness, no loneliness, no separation, no limitation of his powers. He will pass immediately into life. This is the hope that caused the apostle Paul to cry in 1 Corinthians 15, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" To the Grim Reaper, the feared lord of human life, Paul demands, "Where is your sting?" For those who believe, the sting has been removed.

Secondly, Jesus affirmed that he was the basis of this resurrection. He would take away the cause of death and thus defeat it! Death is not normal. It is not simply a natural although unpleasant phenomenon, the end of biological life. Death is an evil that exists due to man's rebellion against God. Death is the result of sin. Paul says that "the wages of

sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The sin of the race is what causes the death of it. And since everyone sins, everyone dies. We're caught in the iron grip of death. As Paul put it elsewhere, death "reigns." In that sense death is completely alien. Now we can appreciate the crucial importance of Jesus' death: it was necessary so that sin could be properly dealt with.

The condition for receiving this assurance is stated twice by Jesus: "He who believes in Me . . ." Scripture holds forth no hope for those who do not believe in Jesus. To those who refuse his invitation, there is nothing but darkness ahead.

The way people die can be illustrative of what they believed in during life. I was reminded of this recently when I read an article paralleling the lives of two well known men who were contemporaries before the turn of the century. D.L. Moody, the acclaimed evangelist, and Robert Ingersoll, the famous lawyer and political leader, both died in 1899. There were many similarities between these two men. Both were raised in Christian homes; both were skilled speakers who drew huge crowds; both attracted loyal followings. But their views of God were strikingly different. Ingersoll was an agnostic and a naturalist. He did not believe in the eternal. He rather stressed the importance of living in the present. To him the Bible was a fable. "The Christian creed," he said once, "is the ignorant past bullying the enlightened present."

His contemporary, D.L. Moody, had very different convictions. He continually presented a resurrected King to a dying people. He embraced the Bible as the hope for humanity, the cross as the turning point in history. Moody left behind a legacy of changed lives.

Two men. Both powerful speakers and influential leaders. One rejected God; the other embraced him. The impact of their systems of belief was clearly seen in how they died. One writer compared the deaths of these two men in these words:

Ingersoll died suddenly. The news of his death stunned his family. His body was kept at home for several days because his wife was reluctant to part with it. It was eventually removed for the sake of the family's health. His remains were cremated, and the public response to his passing was altogether dismal. For a man who put all his hopes in this world, death was tragic, and came without the consolation of hope.

Moody's legacy was different. On December 22nd, 1899, Moody awoke to his last winter dawn. Having grown increasingly weak during the night, he began to speak in slow, measured words: "Earth recedes, heaven opens before me." His son, Will, who was nearby, hurried across the room to his father's side. "Father, you're dreaming," he said. "No, it's no dream, Will. It's beautiful. It's like a trance. If this is death, it's sweet. God is calling me and I must go. Don't call me back." At that point the family gathered around, and moments later the great evangelist died. It was his coronation day, the day he had looked forward to for many years. He was with the Lord. The funeral service for Dwight L. Moody reflected that same confidence. There was no despair. Loved ones gathered to sing praise to God at a triumphant homegoing service. They read the words the evangelist had spoken earlier that year in New York City. "Some day you will read in the papers that Moody is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.

I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the Spirit in 1855. That which is born of the flesh may die; that which is born of the Spirit shall live forever."

Those who believe will never really die. Those who do not believe are already dead. I'm sorry to say that the words of Jesus hold out no hope for those who do not believe in him. In C.S. Lewis' words, they are "left utterly and absolutely outside — repelled, exiled, estranged, and finally, unspeakably, ignored."

Martha's response exuded her strong faith. She believed Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who was to come into the world.

Now it was Mary's turn to come to Jesus.

And 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 arose 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. The Jews then who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, 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." 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. And so the Jews were saying, "Behold how He loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of him who was blind, have kept this man also from dying?"

When Mary reached Jesus, she fell at his feet and uttered the same words as Martha. Her demeanor with him was much more emotional than her stoical sister, consequently the exchange between them followed a much different line. She was overwhelmed by her feelings. Her heart was broken, torn with grief and pain.

Jesus was moved by her sorrow. His reaction was significant. The text reveals his two emotions: anger and sorrow. He was "deeply moved" (33). The word is used of the snorting of a horse. It indicates outrage. Jesus was mad. Some commentators suggest he was mad at the professionalism of some of the mourners, but there is nothing in the text to indicate this. I think he was moved by the grief of the family and angry with the sickness, sin and death that wreaks so much havoc and sorrow in this fallen world. He thought of his friend Lazarus, taken in the prime of his life. He thought of Satan, the murderer, who first taught Eve to sin and thus introduced death to the human race. This made him angry. This is the kind of anger we feel when we hear about an automobile accident that caused the death of a number of young people; when we learn what drugs are doing to our young men and women; when a child is sexually molested. It ought to make us mad, but we ought to get even madder at the one behind it all — the Evil One.

But there was sorrow, too. Jesus wept as he started out for the tomb. The word used is different from that describing the weeping of Mary and the Jews. It literally means "he broke into tears." His were not the tears of a professional wailer, but the quiet tears of a sympathetic High Priest. The

Jews misunderstood his tears; they imagined them to be tears of despair because of his love for Lazarus. It is certainly true that he loved Lazarus, but he was not weeping for that reason. He knew he was on his way to raise him from the dead. He knew that in a few minutes the weeping crowd would be transformed into rejoicing people; that Mary and Martha would have their brother back again in their arms. No, he knew that; he had no doubt of it. He wept because he shared their heartache.

What a beautiful description of the nature of God! It is a remarkable thing that our plight can trouble his spirit, our pain can summon his tears. Twice the Scriptures are blotted with the tears of Jesus. Once, on a hill overlooking Jerusalem, he wept for the nation; and here, on the way to a friend's grave, he wept with those who grieved. What a Savior! He weeps for us not only in our sin, but with us in our suffering.

There is nothing wrong with the anger and tears that come when our loved ones die. It is all right to sorrow. Jesus' tears give dignity to our grief and freedom to our emotions. He understands how we feel. Our tears evoke his! George MacDonald said, "sometimes tears are the only cure for weeping." Sometimes we have to cry. But "we do not sorrow as those who have no hope." Our Lord cares and has done something about the dreadful matter of death. I am reminded of George Matheson's wonderful old hymn:

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee,
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain.
That morn shall tearless be.*

As proof of his power over death, Jesus now goes to Lazarus' grave. Verse 38:

Jesus therefore 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." Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

The sight of the tomb again troubled him. Perhaps it was a graphic reminder of Paradise lost, of Eden gone to seed and of the tomb he would have to enter to regain it. Notice he didn't wave his hands to make the stone disappear. Always there was a beautiful mixture of the human and the divine at work in the miracles of Jesus. He who was about to raise the dead asked for the stone to be removed!

Then there was still Martha's protest: "Lord, don't do this," she implied. "We will be offended by the odor." Notice how Jesus answered. He did not rebuke her, but rather encouraged her, saying, "Remember what I said." The word of God removed this obstacle which her momentary doubt had interjected. "Remember what I said. Did I not say to you that 'if you would believe you would see the glory of God'? Trust me." How many times our faith needs encouragement, a verse word from the Word of God itself to steady us and keep us from faltering. This was what Martha needed.

Having strengthened her faith, Jesus now set about doing the great deed. He began with a simple prayer:

And so they removed the stone. And Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank Thee that Thou hearest Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always; but because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that Thou didst send Me."

Notice the many times in this account that what Jesus did, he did for the sake of others. Earlier he said to the disciples, "I am glad I was not there for your sake." He stayed two days where he was when the message reached him "because he loved Mary and Martha." It was for their sake he did so. Now he prayed out loud for the sake of the people there. He wanted them to see that God the Father was involved with him in this; that he was not a magic worker coming to astonish them, but that God was with him.

And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." He 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."

The loud voice was unnecessary, but it was symbolic of that day when all in the graves will hear his voice and rise (Jn. 5:28). This was for the benefit of those present, that they might know that it was his voice that summons the dead. The personal name, of course, was meant for Lazarus. It was Augustine who first noted that had Jesus not said "Lazarus," he would have emptied the cemetery! One day, everyone will respond to his voice.

We don't know how Lazarus came out. Assuming that his legs were bound, he must have hopped out of the cave. It would have been humorous, I suppose, had it not been so awesome. Suddenly a figure appeared in the door of the tomb, stumbling and staggering about, bound in grave clothes, with a napkin around his head. The gospel draws a curtain over the scene at this point. The reaction of the crowd to the awesome event was unimportant. What mattered then (and it still matters today) was the ultimate response to Jesus:

Many therefore of the Jews, who had come to Mary and beheld what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees, and told them the things which Jesus had done.

Jesus' words and deeds that day divided mankind into believers and unbelievers. They still have that effect today. The issue remains the same: we must face our own death honestly. In looking for a cure, we must consider Jesus. Death is what he came to conquer, and death was the means by which he conquered it. "Made sin, he sin o'erthrew, and death by dying slew." Jesus alone challenged death and took away its mortal sting.

Are you afraid of death? Let this be the day you act so as to assure that you will never die. If you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and if you will invite him to become Lord of your life, beginning today you can know true life, the life of the age to come.

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