

From Death to Life

John 11:1-44

Call: Ps 36:5-9 (NLT)

Scripture: 1 John 5:11-12 (ESV)

I. Intro

A professor once spoke at a missionary conference and convinced two young ladies to become missionaries. However, both sets of parents became extremely angry at this professor. They called the professor and told him, “You know that there is no security in being a missionary. The pay is low and it is very dangerous. Our daughters need to get a job and have a career in order to have some security.”

The professor answered them like this: “You want them to have some security? We’re all on a little ball of rock called earth, and we’re spinning through space at millions of miles an hour. Someday a trapdoor [called death] is going to open up under every single one of us, and we will fall through it. And either there will be ... nothingness – or else there will be the everlasting arms of God. And you want them to get a master’s degree to give them a little security?” (Keller, 26).

Today, we talk about death from John chapter 11, the famous story of Lazarus.

The great Dutch philosopher and Biblical critic, Baruch Spinoza, said he would have gladly given away his whole system of thought to be able to believe what is written in John 11. Marianne Meye Thompson of Fuller Seminary sees this text as the very center of the entire Gospel. “For here,” she says, “we find ourselves at extremes, utter helplessness of humanity in the face of death, and the unparalleled authority of Jesus in the face of death.”

Indeed, we’ve seen Jesus stand before plain water, then turn it into vintage wine. We’ve seen Jesus stand before a desperate father, then heal the man’s son with just a word. We’ve seen Jesus stand before lameness and blindness, then heal a lame man and a blind man. We’ve seen Jesus stand before thousands of hungry people with five loaves and two fish, then multiply the loaves and fish to feed all of them. Throughout this Gospel, Jesus has displayed his authority over the human body and over all of creation. Today he stands before lord death, the hideous and frightening trapdoor that will open under every single one of us, and says, *“I am the resurrection and the life”* (John 11:25).

We have five acts in our story today. So, I invite you into the first act, beginning in John 11, verse 1.

II. The Puzzle (1-16)

1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother

Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." 12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (ESV)

A. The Suffering

Our story begins with a common refrain in our broken world. "Lord, the one you love is sick." How often have we prayed a prayer just like this one? Lord, behold my mother is sick. Lord, my grandfather has cancer. Lord, my daughter is not doing well. So, from the very beginning, this story hits home for each one of us. So, how will Jesus respond?

B. The Scene

Let's set the scene. At the end of chapter 10, Jesus left Jerusalem and the intense debate with the Religious Authorities to go to Bethany beyond the Jordan. Bethany beyond the Jordan is a place of refuge and restoration for Jesus. It is a place where people believe in him. However, this text takes place at Bethany near Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is not safe. As his disciples say, Jesus is almost stoned in Jerusalem in chapter 10. So, Bethany near Jerusalem is a place of danger for Jesus. Will Jesus leave his place of safety and go to the place of hostility?

C. The Puzzle

But, we are introduced to a puzzle here. Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus is ill. We know from the other Gospels that Jesus was close friends with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and spent much time at their house. But notice they don't request Jesus to come. They simply assume he will come immediately. But, Jesus says that this sickness does not lead to death. What does he mean by that? The words cannot mean that Lazarus will not enter the grave because of this sickness, because Jesus knows he has died. The clue is in the follow on phrase, "it is for God's glory." In other words, death will not be the last word in the events of Lazarus' sickness. The last words will be the glory of God. I don't think this means that God made Lazarus die so he could glorify himself. I think it means that Jesus, being who he is, can turn tragedy into a manifestation of God's glory. Well, we don't know at this point in the story. It's a puzzle.

D. The Deepening Puzzle

But, the puzzle deepens when Jesus doesn't go immediately. He loves this family so much, he stays two days longer? Why the delay? Notice also that he doesn't mention any of it to his disciples until after the two days. He doesn't make any preparations. He doesn't even send any messengers saying he'll be there soon. He simply makes Mary and Martha wait! He loves them so much he delays in going. Why? At this point, we're not told. It is a deepening puzzle.

E. The Father's Orders

However, we do learn here something we need to accept about Jesus. Later we will see that Jesus fully identifies with the pain and suffering of Mary and Martha, and he does something about it. But here, we see that Jesus is not controlled by our desires. He is going to do something but he is not going to do it on our time. Remember in chapter 2, the wedding in Cana, when his mother urges him to do something, but he waits? And, remember in chapter 7, his brothers urge him to go to the Feast of Tabernacles, but he waits. As Leon Morris says, "In all three cases, the urge to action comes from those near or dear, mother, brothers and now this family. In all three, their request was refused. In all three, Jesus ends up doing what was suggested. But, in all three, only after it had been made clear that he did what he did according to God's timing according to God's will" (Morris, 540). Jesus does hear our cry and does respond, but in the Father's way and in the Father's time. Jesus hears the call of Mary and Martha, but he will only go when the Father's call is clear. He stays for two days because he's waiting for orders from his Father.

F. The Ever Deepening Puzzle

But, the puzzle gets even more puzzling. In verse 11, Jesus says Lazarus has fallen asleep. The disciples totally misunderstand, thinking he is talking about real sleep. Jesus clarifies in verse 14 that Lazarus has died, then says he is "glad... so that you may believe." Glad? Why would he say that? Answer: He is glad because he knows their faith is going to grow. And in this Gospel, it's faith that leads to life! Somehow Jesus says he will use this death to strengthen their belief in him.

G. The Post-Death Actions

So after two days, Jesus goes. Now, while Jesus was on His way, after Lazarus had died, a few things would have happened:

- A burial gown, called a traveling dress, would have been put on Lazarus.
- Lazarus would have been wrapped lovingly with bandages and spices.
- A burial procession out to the grave would have happened.
- There would have been some memorial speeches at the grave.
- Mary and Martha would then have returned to their house. On the way, hired mourners and wailers would have lined the pathway, wailing loudly the whole time.

III. The Pain (17-22)

[17](#) Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. [18](#) Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, [19](#) and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. [20](#) So when Martha heard that Jesus was

coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." (ESV)

A. Four Days

Lazarus has now been in the grave for four days. This is important because many Jews at that time believed that the soul stayed close to the grave for three days after death, hoping to be able to return to the body. But, on the fourth day, the soul sees the beginning of the decomposition of the body and leaves. Therefore, day four is when hope finally dies. Mourning and grief reach their deepest depth on the fourth day. It is on this day that Lazarus is really gone. And, that is when Jesus arrives.

B. He Arrives

So, Jesus arrives and Martha runs to him. And with bloodshot eyes full of pain questions Jesus. She asks the question that we all ask, doesn't she? "Lord, if you'd have been here, you could have rescued my child. Lord, if you'd have been here, you could have healed my mother." Questions that are shot full of anger, but also full of faith. Martha's words reveal her profound disappointment in Jesus, but also affirm his power. She's hurt and angry. She knows that Jesus could have been there in two days, two whole days before hope dies. But, now it's too late. Why Jesus? Why did you let this happen Jesus?

C. Anger and Disappointment

Don't miss Martha's example here. She shares her raw anger and unfiltered disappointment with Jesus. This means we can also approach him with our raw feelings. We can express all of our conflicted feelings, and there are so many, in the face of death. This story teaches us that Jesus can handle all of our pain and hurt and resentment and anger and depression. It's all real, and we can express it to Jesus. The Psalms also teach us the same thing, don't they?

IV. The Promise (23-27)

23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." (ESV)

A. The General Hope

In the midst of the real pain, Jesus then makes his staggering promise. He first says to Martha that Lazarus will rise again. This is a gentle reminder from Jesus of the general hope of the resurrection at the end of time. The time when his followers will be given new bodies to live in a fully restored earth. This doctrine was taught by the Pharisees of the day, but not by the Sadducees. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, which is why they are "sad-u-see."

B. The Resurrection and Life

Martha's response shows that this general hope doesn't give comfort in her current pain. She says, *"I know he will rise again on the last day"* (24). So Jesus then speaks to her present pain. And, his words are some of the most comforting words in all of Scripture. *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.*

Not – there is a resurrection and a life: not – I will give resurrection and life; rather *"I am the resurrection and the life."* What does Jesus mean by this great claim? I think two things.

First, by saying, *"I am the resurrection,"* Jesus is saying that for those who believe in him, death is not the last word. Death is real and death is awful, but it is not final! Believers go to the grave yes, but they go through the grave to eternal life. A believer's life is no longer bound by death! The power of death is gone! As Paul says, *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"* (1 Cor 15:55).

Secondly, Jesus says, *"I am the life."* Jesus being the life explains him being the resurrection. Jesus is life, and anyone who believes in him receives his life now. Jesus moves the hope of the future into the present. He moves the theory into reality. The life of the future is available now! And, this life is a different quality of life, because it is the life of God. Death cannot touch it. The grave cannot destroy it. This is why Jesus says that this sickness is not unto death, because Lazarus believes. I think Leslie Newbigin captures it well: "Jesus is himself in his own person ... the end as he was the beginning. Resurrection is no longer a mere doctrine. It has a living face and a name. Jesus is himself the presence of life, of God's gift beyond the grave. To be bound to Jesus by faith is to share already now the life beyond the grave." (Newbigin, 142). So Martha's pain is met with this great promise.

Jesus then asks Martha, "Do you believe this?" In other words, "Martha, do you believe that I in fact do have power over lord death?" To which Martha responds with a yes.

V. The Pathos (28-37)

28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. 34 And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" (ESV)

A. Mary

Mary now enters the story. Martha goes to get Mary privately because there are loud mourners all around. Mary then comes outside the village to Jesus and repeats Martha's words and weeps. The word used here is used of wailing and crying loudly without restraint.

B. The Agitation

When Jesus sees her wailing and those with her wailing, he is deeply moved in spirit and troubled. Those words do not do this justice. To "be deeply moved" is a very strong emotional verb and was used in the 1st century for horses snorting in rage. Think of an agitated horse who rears up on its back legs and snorts into the air. He is greatly disturbed, even angry at the core of his being, so that you could see his body tremble. So, while everyone else is weeping and wailing, he lets out a disturbing, inarticulate snort.

But why? Why is he so angry? After all, he knows what he's about to do, doesn't he? Why is he so angry? I think it's because he knows death is not part of his good creation. Death does not belong in his good creation! Death is a result of human sin. God had warned Adam and Eve that if they went their way without God, death would result. And, they did, and they died. Humanity's disobedience resulted in death. And Jesus is standing before that which does not belong, and he is angry.

Could he even be standing there and looking down upon the ages of human history and seeing the death that is coming to all his good image-bearers? His good image was never meant to be desecrated like this! Then, he rears up in anger at what should not be? As one writer says, "I hear in Jesus' actions and his snort, this ought not be!"

Which means for us it is ok to express anger at death. God does, because this is an intrusion into his good world.

C. The Weeping

Jesus then weeps. This is another different verb for crying. And, this one means to quietly shed tears. So, you have the living God coming to grips with the death of a friend, first a bursting groan of anger, followed by a quiet burst of tears. The God of the universe quietly sheds tears.

The Greeks saw gods as unfeeling, passionless and without feeling. They felt if a god were to be a god, there could be no emotions. That's not the living God, as evidenced right here. Let this scene grab you. Don't let it become dull. Some of us know this story so well, it doesn't grip us. Here is the living God, standing with grieving people, agonized by the human condition, and so full of passion and emotion, he weeps with them. In a moment, he will wipe away all the tears. But, as Darrell Johnson says, "As long as there are tears, he, the living God, will cry them with you."

VI. The Power (38-44)

38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not

tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” 43 When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” 44 The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” (ESV)

A. The Tomb

Jesus does not stop with identifying with our pain. His love and compassion moves him to act. He tells them to take away the stone. Mary protests saying Lazarus will stink.

I’ve done a couple gravesides this year. To bring this scene into our world, it would be like being at a graveside. And Jesus walking in and saying open the casket. And I look at him, and I protest, like Mary. Then, he looks at me and says, “Did I not tell you that you would see the glory of God?”

B. The Command

Jesus then prays and without any fanfare or hype, with no Hollywood music playing in the background, he simply issues a command, *“Lazarus, come out!”* This man from Galilee, with tears streaming down his face, stands before lord death, and calls out with a loud voice, Lazarus come out!

C. The Result

And, from within the cave, four days after being laid in it, on the day when hope died, Lazarus walks out, the grave clothes still around his body. Of course! Isn’t this the same voice that spoke into the darkness ages ago and said, “let there be light”?

Lazarus would of course die again. But on that day in Bethany, the place of danger, Jesus shows that by believing in him, we live even if we die, because he’s the resurrection and the life.

Today, I want to leave you with three implications.

VII. Implications

1. The Word

When Jesus speaks, something happens. His Word accomplishes what he announces. He says come out and a dead man simply has to come out of the grave. In Isaiah 55, we discover that God’s Word that goes out from his mouth will not return empty (Isa 55:11). It will bear fruit. It may take time, but it will bear fruit. His Word achieves his purposes.

2. No Fear

We do not need to fear death. Death has been conquered. As one writer says, “Instead of death swallowing up people, it is swallowed up by Jesus” (Taylor, 141). If we believe in Jesus, we do not need to be afraid of death. Our life is not taken away at the grave, it is simply and

profoundly changed. That's why at memorial services we can promise that those who belong to Jesus are gone, but they're not dead. Lazarus is gone, but he is not dead. And, when he dies again, he will be gone but he will not be dead. The dread of death is gone for those who believe.

3. The Hope

Now, we all know that the literal grave is not the only grave of death. There are many other graves in which people live. The grave of bitterness or jealousy or greed or fear or lust or addiction or depression or pandemic weariness, etc. And, Jesus, the resurrection and the life, weeps outside of those graves too. He weeps with each one of us outside of our graves as well. And, the good news is that he has the capacity to speak us out of those graves too.

So, the question for you is "Do you believe?"
Amen.

Benediction

Come out! Jesus commands,
And calls us from the graves of our existence
into the brightness of a new day.

Come out! Jesus commands,
And unbinds us from the chains of our past.

Come out! Jesus commands,
And live a life full of grace and hope.

So now:

Go out!
Into a world that needs your reflected light and life.

Go out!
Into a world that needs the love of God,
carried on your lips, and in your hands and on your feet.

Go out!
Into the world to live as God's resurrected people!

Amen.

Resources

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Keller, Tim, *On Death*

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John*

Newbigin, Leslie, *The Light Has Come*

Taylor, David, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life*