
The Resurrection and the Life

John 11:17-27¹

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We are in the midst of a dreadful pandemic. It has disrupted our lives. It has exposed fear, anger and deep anxieties. These have come from our craving for security, safety and comfort. It is a hard time on what is supposed to be a wonderfully celebratory day. All over the world, on what for Christians is a day to celebrate coming from death to life, we are not gathered as usual. Most God-honoring, wise churches are meeting on-line, even as we are today.

We are reminded that we will all die. Most people rarely think about death or dying. But not now. All of us recognize now how near death can be.

This virus is an invisible predator that attacks the human cell, cuts its way inside and then begins to replicate itself. Eventually, it overwhelms the body's defenses and the person dies.

But a greater and more deadly contagion has entered the world. It entered through one person. It has been passed on to every human born of a father. It has entered the soul and severed it from its true life so that the soul is dead spiritually. This is called, sin.

We all were born spiritually dead. We all will die physically one day. These are simple, Biblical facts. Since these things are so, then the resurrection becomes a Biblical necessity.

This is the story about a man named Lazarus. He and his sisters were very special friends of Jesus. But Lazarus fell ill. The sisters sent to Jesus to summon Him to come help, to come heal Lazarus. But Jesus delayed. On purpose, He did not leave for Bethany where his friends lived. Meanwhile, Lazarus died.

Now Jesus does what baffles us. He loves them, but He waits, He delays. It is not that Jesus sees no need for urgency. It is not that He does not care. In the light of the news, in the light of His reassurance to them, in the light of His love for them, He waits. And He waits two long days. Why does He delay? Why does He not go? Because Jesus is always doing the Father's will in the Father's time for the Father's glory. But now (v.7) it is time to go.

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The Troubling Situation (v.17-19)

Jesus arrived in Bethany. This is where our text takes up.

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.

A Late Arrival (v.17)

Verse 17 really grabs me. On His arrival to the outskirts of Bethany, Jesus discovers with surprise, “found”, that Lazarus has been entombed for four days. So it has been at least six days since the messenger came. Jesus is not surprised that Lazarus is dead. He knows that even if He has used the language of “sleep”. He is surprised that Lazarus is in a tomb. From here to verse forty, the question keeps ringing through the text, “Why have you buried Him? I said this would not end in death but in glory.”

A Questionable Crowd (v.18-19)

In the text before this, the disciples thought there was a perfectly good reason why Jesus did not go to Lazarus. The proximity of Bethany to Jerusalem meant the nearness of the Jews as well. Now listen, in the Gospel of John, the Jews are *always* the bad guys. John had never spoken of “the Jews” in a positive way up to this point. The Jews malignant hatred for Christ was reason enough for the disciples to have preferred the comfort and security of the trans-Jordan. The Jews had recently attempted to stone Jesus. There was no reason to think they would more kindly disposed now.

Now, here are the stone slingers. The Jews. They have come down to comfort Mary and Martha. Jesus’ enemies will use every opportunity to drive wedges between Christ and His followers. Why else would they come? Can’t you hear it now? “I am so sorry Lazarus died. It is too bad that Jesus either couldn’t or wouldn’t do anything about it. I wonder why He didn’t come. Imagine, after all you’ve done for Him.” I hear in the sweet words of consolation the slithering hiss of the snake.

A Divided Response (v.20)

John points out that Mary stays at home while Martha comes. She is not going to wait. She hurries out to meet Jesus. She has something to say to Him, not in the crowded confines of even their large home. Rather, she wants to know why. It is hard for her to understand. She has her questions. I don’t think she intends to challenge Jesus. But He is their friend. What delayed Him?

The Concerning Expectations (v.20-24)

Martha expresses her concerns and thus her expectations.

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." 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."

Here is the struggle faith can wrestle with. God often seems absent from our troubles. We feel that deeply. If Jesus had been there, our Lazarus would not have died. But... But, we still know that God can assert His power on our behalf. For Martha, it looks bad. It is hard to understand. Maybe there is an explanation. But here are certainly her expectations. Maybe it is not hopeless, after all.

Follow this dialog carefully.

Martha asks a question: Jesus was able to prevent Lazarus' death.

Jesus states a truth: Lazarus will rise again.

Martha believes the truth for the future, but not for the present. She has faith. She believes. She knows the general truths and facts of God's Word. Yes, he will rise again in the last day.

Of Jesus' Presence and Agenda (v21)

Martha certainly expected the Lord to have been there. They had sent a messenger to press upon the Lord the seriousness of Lazarus' illness. Jesus had been called upon to help them in their time of need. If Jesus would come, then Jesus would have kept her brother from dying. She assumes Jesus has the same agenda that she does.

This is entirely understandable. It would be very confusing if someone who had the ability in a life and death matter to help and didn't come to give aid. You can hear the reproach in her voice.

Of Jesus' Prayer and Access (v.22)

Martha expresses her confidence in Jesus' prayers and powers. She expects that what He asks, God will do. This is faith in Jesus. This is faith in God. It is good to hope and expect that Jesus' love for us will move Him to do what He can for us. What Martha is hoping in and is confident is what we are assured now.

Of Jesus' Promise and Assertion (v.23)

Jesus makes a simple statement. Lazarus will rise from the dead. He makes it as a statement and a promise. He gives it no time frame. It is just true. God's people do and will rise from the dead. What does this mean?

Of Jesus' Power and Advent (v.24)

Martha understands Jesus to be making a promise about the last days when all believers will be raised from the dead. She believes. She believes what the Old

Testament taught. Let's not be critical of her. Let us commend her. She believes with all her soul that her brother, because he is a believer, will rise from the dead in the last Day.

But John is writing this text to Christians. He is writing to people who at this point, should be holding their breath. John is going to challenge our own belief. Do we have a New Testament, New Covenant understanding of the resurrection? The next two sentences are what we must believe.

The Challenging Assertions (v.25-26)

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?"

Jesus asserts that He, Himself is the Person of this truth. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. We are not here talking about abstract truth. We are talking about a present reality. That Lazarus will rise again *will always depend on the fact that Jesus is the resurrection and the life*. Do you believe that?

Three Deep Truths (v.25-26a)

These two simple sentences state the essence of the resurrection truths.

The Resurrection is a Person

We are used to thinking of the resurrection as an event. It is something that has happened. But when Jesus spoke this, the event had not happened. But the person was already here, in this world.

This is fundamental to understanding our Bibles and to being true to how the New Testament thinks. The Old Testament is fulfilled in a *Person* who *performs* and *provides* what has been *promised*. Jesus then is the resurrection and the life. When Jesus came into this old, fallen, cursed world, He was the presence of the new creation, the new life, the divine life breaking into the old world.

This is another of Jesus' "I am..." statements. He is fulfillment of the Old Testament. He is the reality of which it spoke in all its varied forms. He is the true manna. He is the water of life. He is light of the world. He is the resurrection and the life.

On this day, when we remember the Jesus rose from the dead, let us never forget. That event is about a person. It is not about spring, or fertile fields, or bunnies, or eggs or any other of its pagan mythologies. It is about a Person, the Lord Jesus, who came into this world and whose life was in and of itself both a divine life and a new creation life. When Jesus was raised from dead on the third day after his crucifixion, God the Father certified that He had accepted His Son's sacrifice. Redemption's work was done. The true sabbath rest had begun. God's salvation was accomplished for His people.

The Resurrection is a Promise

The promise is to whoever believes. Anyone who truly believes in Jesus Christ will be raised from the dead in the Last Day. This promise that Martha believed and hoped in is still true for us as well. Those who believe in Jesus in a saving way, even if we die physically, we will be raised to a new physical life in a new body. This is the promise, the hope, the confidence that we have, not only because of this text, but others like 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

This promise is guaranteed because Jesus Himself rose from the dead. If Jesus did not rise, we are of all people most hopeless and foolish. If Jesus did not rise, if HE is not the resurrection and the life, then we are living a lie. We have put our hope in a myth. We have lived for a future that does not exist.

But Jesus did rise from dead. This is what the Bible says. Since the Bible says it is true with all that it means, then it is true. We don't need any testimony from history. We don't need a modern empty relic site. We don't need a fake shroud. We just believe the word of the Apostles and the words of Jesus.

The Resurrection is a Power

Here it is, "Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." What does that mean? It all depends on what is meant by "Everyone who lives..."

Does this mean that any physically living person who believes in Jesus will never die physically? Well, that is obviously not true because the writer of this gospel of John died physically as did all of the Apostles.

This means that all of those who come to life spiritually and believe in Jesus will never die spiritually. This is frankly the only sensible interpretation. It is consistent with what John has written, what Jesus taught and what the Apostles taught. Remember that the gospel of John was written after all the other apostles had finished writing and had died. It may be in the front of the New Testament in our Bibles, but it was written very late in John's life. What is Jesus saying and what is John teaching?

To come to life spiritually is the new birth, our regeneration. It is coming to life out of spiritual death. You see, we experience two resurrections. We experience a spiritual resurrection from being dead in sin. We are made alive, quickened, joined to the life of God by Spirit. As a consequence of the new birth and possible along with it, we believe. We are granted the gifts of faith and repentance (Ephesians 2:8-9). We come to life spiritually and believe.

But see the next phrase? We will never die. In what sense? We will never die spiritually. We will never lose our salvation, to put in the worst terms. Once we have experienced the new birth and the power of the resurrection life, it will never, never, ever end. We will not, we cannot, be separated ever again from the life of God.

One Penetrating Question (v.26b)

Just a simple question. Jesus asked it of Martha. John asked it of his readers. I ask it of you. Do you believe that Jesus is “the resurrection and the life. If you believe in Him, though you die, yet you shall live, and if you have come to life (lives) and believe in Jesus you shall never die.” Do you believe this?

The Responding Affirmation (v.27)

²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

Martha understands. She has heard the truth, affirmed the truth. But now she affirms who Christ is, places her trust in that great affirmation and bows to His sovereign power. She declares that she believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the very Son of God who has come into the world. She affirms:

Who the Lord is

In His authority - As Lord, we are to bow to Him.

In His centrality - As the Messiah, the Anointed One, we recognize that He is the fulfillment of all the OT.

In His Deity - As the Son of God, we must confess the Trinity.

Why the Lord has come

The Redemption is coming through the sacrificial, substitutionary death of Jesus and His real, bodily resurrection from the dead..

The Resurrection and the Life is coming into the world to bring life to the spiritually dead through His own death and resurrection...

The Reality of the new creation has broken into this world in person and power of Jesus Christ...

Reflect and Respond

On this resurrection Sunday, having a warm, fuzzy, sermon does not serve you well. In the midst of Martha’s grief, pain and questions, Jesus challenges what she believes. This is what she needs.

And so do you. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you gladly affirm that He has come into the world, died for His people and rose again the third day? Are you willing to bow to Him as your redeemer and ruler?