

Dying to Live

John 11:1-45

Death – it's not the worst thing that can happen to us. We *think* it is, which is why we live in a death-denying and death-defying culture. We cover the grave with artificial grass and pretend there isn't dirt underneath. We cover our dead with the mortician's art. We put away our sick and elderly and infirm into institutions and homes so that we won't be confronted with the all-too-awful reality of death. And yet it crashes the party of life anyway.

And so what shocks me most about this seventh and last sign of Jesus in the Gospel of John, is how casually he treats the death of his friend. It's almost as though Jesus deliberately neglects Lazarus (whose name, ironically, means "God helps"). He could have healed Lazarus if he had wanted to. He didn't even have to go to Bethany – he could have healed him from a distance. He turned water into wine without doing or saying a thing. He healed the blind man with a little bit of spit and mud. But Jesus doesn't help. Instead he lets Lazarus die.

We need to think about this and take it to heart. We pray for the sick and ask for their healing. We hope against hope for miracles, and then we're disappointed they don't happen the way we want them. It's a crisis of faith for some people. People lose their religion when Jesus takes his own sweet time doing his thing.

There are those who suggest it's all about faith. That if we believe the right way, if we believe the right things – if we name it and we claim it – then God will give it to us. And yet here's a man who Jesus loved – and he dies. There probably wasn't anyone who believed more that Jesus could help than his sisters, Mary and Martha. They named it. They claimed it. They sent word to Jesus, they prayed, they hoped. And then Jesus blows the whole thing off with "It's no big deal" and he leaves his friend to die. Why? Because in Lazarus' death, the glory of God is revealed and the Son of God is glorified.

Jesus eventually shows up in Bethany, four days too late. Martha is heartbroken, carrying all the weight of her disappointment with her. "Lord, if you had only been here, my brother would not have died." To which Jesus replies, "Your brother will rise again." Jesus means in a few minutes, but Martha doesn't hear it that way. She remembers her Sabbath school lessons, possibly that story in Ezekiel about the dry bones coming to life, and so she says, "I know He will rise again in the resurrection on the last day". Like a good Confirmation student, she's paid attention. She knows the dead will rise. So will her brother. In the end it's all going to work out. But that's cold comfort in the face of this tragedy.

Jesus pushes Martha's faith further. "Not then, *now!* I *am*..." — notice the present tense, the big "I AM" — "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" That's the question Jesus puts into *our* ears this morning. Do we believe this? It's not a matter of whether Jesus can cure our colds and our cancers – he can. It's not even a matter of whether we believe he can do that. For the question is not simply that we trust him with our *lives* and that all things that can go wrong with them he will somehow make good. The question is, do we trust him with our *deaths* and with the deaths of our loved ones? Do we believe that even though we die, we will not die *forever*?

One of the reasons we tend to balk at all this talk about death is because we think we are only slightly broken. We think that all we need is a few minor repairs – a sin here, a transgression there; an ache here, a pain there. But the stark truth is that “the wages of sin is death”, and none of us are going to miss payday. But the future of the dead in the hands of Jesus is glorious, because he, and he alone, is the resurrection and the life.

Resurrection from the dead is where all religion ends and faith in Jesus begins. He alone is the resurrection and the life – not Buddha, not Vishnu, not Krishna, not Mohammed, not Allah, not whoever or whatever else you would like to substitute there. Jesus, God in the flesh, is the only one who promises life from the dead, and he alone delivers it in his own death and resurrection. For everyone. That’s the great big surprise on the last day. All the dead rise – not just the religious dead, or the Lutheran dead – *all* the dead. In fact some like to say that Lutherans *are* dead, which puts us at a distinct advantage here, I think.

Please note, I’m not talking about heaven and hell here. I’m talking about rising from the dead. I imagine there are going to be a few astonished looks on the faces of some people who have said no to Jesus their entire lives only to rise on the last day, all thanks to Jesus. And the hell of it all is that those who refused the best deal that ever was in Jesus will get what they want – but, then, no one said that unbelief was wise.

Speaking of unbelief, do you notice that nobody seems to believe in Jesus in this account of the raising of Lazarus, at least not unto *death*? Martha doesn’t believe much more than to recite a few memorised sentences from her catechism. She’s still upset with him for not coming sooner. And Mary, who sat at Jesus’ feet and took in all his teaching, is equally upset. And those who come to mourn with Mary and Martha -- they don’t believe anything either. They’re wondering out loud why Jesus didn’t do anything for his best friend. And as for Lazarus, well he doesn’t believe much of anything because he’s been dead for four days.

I’m inkling to believe that that’s why Jesus wept – not because he is grieving for Lazarus, because he knows what he is going to do – but because he is weeping out of *frustration*. John says, “Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” The Greek is much stronger. It means he was deeply aggravated and highly irritated. I’d give you my translation but it’s not polite. And so he goes to the tomb of Lazarus and starts yelling things. He orders the stone to be rolled away. And again the unbelief from Martha: “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.” [I love the old King James for this. It says, “Lord, by this time he *stinketh*.”] And Jesus retorts, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” And then he fires off a prayer, which is more for the benefit of the bystanders, and then he literally shouts into the open tomb, “Lazarus, come out!” And lo and behold Lazarus comes out, looking like an Egyptian mummy, bound hand and foot and a burial cloth covering his face.

Like all the miraculous signs in John, this one is a picture of what is going to happen to all of us on the Last Day. It’s a sneak preview of the coming attraction of the resurrection of the dead, when Jesus will call out into every grave, and every corpse will sit up and take notice of the sound of his voice, and will rise in the power of his word. I love that picture – that resurrection day is the one Lord’s Day where *nobody* sleeps in for Church.

We’re told that many believed in Jesus because of this miracle. They learned to trust that Jesus wasn’t just a miracle worker – but that he is the miracle himself – God in the flesh – come to live and die and rise again for their sins and ours. And so they learned to trust him, in life and in death. And they learned to entrust their dead to him because he alone can raise them from the dead.

May we learn and believe this also. For there will come a day for each of us – if there hasn’t already been – when we will be in the shoes of Mary and Martha, weeping at the grave of a loved one, and we will experience in our own being the disappointment of prayers apparently

unanswered. Or, we may have a day like Lazarus – when we are sick unto death, and Jesus, our best friend, seemingly nowhere to be seen.

When that happens, remember this day in Bethany. Remember what Jesus said to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life.” Remember and trust his word. For you have already been baptised into his death and raised in his resurrection. Even though you die, yet you *shall* live. So trust Jesus with your death, and with all of your dead. He will not disappoint you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.