

## The Resurrection and the Life

Two weeks ago we looked at the amazing events that John describes in chapters 7 and 8 of his gospel, events that took place at the Feast of Shelters or Tabernacles. We read that He made the offer of Living Water to any who would come to Him believing - there's that word again - "If you believe in Me, come and drink" and then gave the promise of Scripture that living waters would flow out from within. Then we read that He went to the Temple Treasury after the last night of the Illumination of the Temple and announced that He is the Light of the World. And then, in the context of the priests singing and chanting the most simple and profound of God's self-description, "I Am, I Am He", Jesus says, "Before Abraham was born, I Am!" In so doing, Jesus was telling the Jewish leaders that, just as the presence of the Lord God was with His people in the wilderness, so now that Presence was with them in the person of Jesus.

These were amazing claims, claims that had only two possible responses from those who were guardians of the Jewish faith. Either they had to believe those claims and bow their knees in worship to Jesus, or they had to stone Him to death, to rid the earth of this blasphemer, this man who claimed to be God. They chose the latter option, but Jesus slipped away from them and they had to plot another way to get rid of Him.

After this, Jesus left the city and went out to the Jordan River, to a place where John the Baptist had once been baptizing. We're told in John 1:28 that John had baptized at a town called Bethany, east of the Jordan. It was there, or near there, that He received a message from two sisters, Mary and Martha, telling Him that their brother was very ill. Jesus was a good friend of this family, having spent time in their home, and He would have been grieved that Lazarus was not well, but He said to His disciples:

*"Lazarus' sickness will not end in death. No, it is for the glory of God. I, the Son of God, will receive glory from this."*

And then the text tell us:

*Although Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus, He stayed where He was for the next two days and did not go to them. (11:4ff)*

Jesus clearly knows what's going on with Lazarus and how it will all turn out. He's been talking with His Father and the Father has told Him what will soon be taking place. Jesus also knows the big picture, that once He goes to Jerusalem and calls His friend out of the tomb, that the religious leaders will seriously plot to end His life. He's not in a rush to head to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, but His agenda is not His own; He waits for the timing that the Father gives Him. He is heading into His final hour and the timing has to be just right.

*Finally, after two days, He said to His disciples, "Let's go to Judea again." But His disciples objected. "Teacher," they said, "only a few days ago the Jewish leaders in Judea were trying to kill you. Are you going there again?" (11:7,8)*

It seems there was a safe Bethany, east of the Jordan, and an unsafe Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. The disciples were feeling comfortable and secure in the

Bethany east of the Jordan, and not at all sure of the wisdom of going to the Bethany where Mary and Martha lived and where the Jewish religious leaders could easily find Jesus. After some words encouraging the disciples not to be controlled by fear, He tells them that Lazarus has died and then adds, "Come, let's go see him." (v.15)

*When Jesus arrived at Bethany, He was told that Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days. Bethany was only a few miles down the road from Jerusalem and many of the people had come to pay their respects and console Martha and Mary on their loss. When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet Him. But Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."*

*Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."*

*"Yes," Martha said, "when everyone else rises, on resurrection day."*

*Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in Me and will never perish. Do you believe this, Martha?"*

*"Yes, Lord," she told him. "I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the One who has come into the world from God." Then she left Him and returned to Mary. (11:17-28)*

We'll stop there for a bit and look at a couple of things that are going on in Jesus' relationship with Martha. The first obvious thing is that Martha greets Jesus with words of blame: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." In other words, Jesus, it's your fault that Lazarus is no longer alive and with us. I wonder if Martha hadn't spent the past few days wondering why Jesus hadn't come and hadn't come. She had watched her brother lose his battle for life and their dear and amazing friend didn't show up to support them in their darkest hour. She knew nothing, of course, of Jesus' conversations with His disciples, His assurance to them that Lazarus' sickness would not end in death. She just felt the loss and, I think, a bit of anger that Jesus hadn't made a greater effort to rescue His friend Lazarus.

Note Jesus' calm and very direct response: "Your brother will rise again." And Martha's immediate response is to think way down the road, to the ultimate end when all the dead are raised to life. It's interesting to me that that's her default, her 'go-to', because I think that would be true for most people. Most people wouldn't think Jesus was talking about Lazarus coming back to life sometime in the next few minutes, but that's what Jesus is talking about. And that sets the stage for His powerful statement about death and life that overrides every other statement you or I have ever heard about death and life:

*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. (11:25)*

Jesus is saying, "I am greater than death." This is one of the most audacious claims yet from a man who has made a whole series of impossible claims. Again, there is a key that Jesus gives us and it's that word "believe"; "those who believe in Me, even

though they die ... will live again.” And Jesus asks Martha if she believes and she responds that, yes, she does believe into Jesus, that her confession is that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the One who was to come into the world from God.

So that’s the way Jesus’ encounter with Martha went. Now let’s look at Mary and Jesus meeting at the same place, just outside Bethany:

*(Martha) called Mary aside from the mourners and told her, “The Teacher is here and wants to see you.” So Mary immediately went to see Him. Now Jesus had stayed outside the village at the place where Martha met Him. When the people who were at the house trying to console Mary saw her leave so hastily, they assumed she was going to Lazarus’ grave to weep, so they followed her there. When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell down at His feet and said, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” (11:28-32)*

What’s different here between Martha’s response to Jesus and Mary’s? The initial statement is the same: if You had been here, Lazarus would still be alive. It’s a statement of faith in Jesus, that He had the power to heal, but also a statement of blame - ‘You didn’t come’. What’s different is that Mary doesn’t add the phrase, “But even now I know that God will give You whatever You ask.” Mary doesn’t express hope.

Jesus’ response is extremely emotional. Mary and her friends are wailing - it’s loud and heart-rending. Jesus is moved with indignation - the word used should be understood here as deep grief and sorrow. And, He is deeply troubled. He is fully identifying with the grief around Him. He asks, “Where have you put him?” and they respond, “Lord, come and see.” And Jesus starts to weep. This is the same Jesus who had told His disciples that He was glad He hadn’t been there when Lazarus died because now they were going to have another opportunity to believe in Him. And now He comes, sees the grief of Lazarus’ sisters, and He breaks down and sobs. I think this story tells us something important about the character of God. He knows what’s going to happen to us tomorrow and the next day. He knew when our heart was about to be broken and He knows that it will all work out in the end. Just because He knows all of that doesn’t mean that He doesn’t care. Here is the Son of God, knowing what is about to happen, the raising of Lazarus, and He is so impacted by the grief of His dear friends that He can’t help but share in it. Make a note of that and reflect on it the next time you’re tempted to think that God has overlooked you in your suffering.

Some people standing by noticed the love that Jesus had for Lazarus while others wondered out loud why He couldn’t have kept His friend from dying. And we’re told again that Jesus is deeply troubled.

*Then they came to the grave. It was a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance. “Roll the stone aside,” Jesus told them. But Martha, the dead man’s sister, said, “Lord, by now the smell will be terrible because he has been dead for four days.”*

*Jesus responded, "Didn't I tell you that you will see God's glory if you believe?" So they rolled the stone aside. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, thank you for hearing Me. You always hear Me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so they will believe You sent Me." Then Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus came out, bound in grave clothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him go." (11:38-44)*

When you tell people that you are the resurrection and the life, this is what makes it believable.

To me, the hinge point for John in this passage is found in verses 39 and 40. Jesus has just asked for the stone to be rolled away and Martha makes a feeble protest, "But he's been dead for four days! The smell will be horrible!" What is Martha seeing? R-E-A-L-I-T-Y. That's all. She's just looking at the world through the lens of what's real. She's not going to pretend that four days in the tomb will have had no effect on her brother's body. And so she makes her protest - "Are you sure this is such a good idea, Jesus?"

I'm struck by Jesus' response: "Didn't I tell you that you will see God's glory if you believe?" This is huge. If we will believe into Jesus, we will see what otherwise would always be invisible to us. We can't wait around until we have all the evidence and then declare on the basis of our rationality that Jesus is the Son of God. But when we believe that He's the Son of God, our eyes are opened to see Him in ways we could never have imagined. Jesus is always asking His disciples to believe, to put their confidence in Him, and, as they go along in their journey of believing, they see amazing things. On the other hand, the religious skeptics, the Pharisees and teachers of Jewish law, are unable to see, even when they know that a miracle has happened, because they begin from a position of unbelief. "Didn't I tell you that you will see God's glory if you believe?" That's a profound reminder to us that believing - anything - requires a leap of faith, a willingness to step into the unknown, to trust in someone greater than ourselves to lead us.

All right. Lazarus is alive. Wrapped up in grave clothes, he has exited his tomb and is restored to his sisters, his friends, his community. And this is a terrible thing for the religious leaders of the Jews. Because of this miracle, just outside their power base in Jerusalem, they are threatened like they've never been threatened before. Let's read:

*Many of the people who were with Mary believed in Jesus when they saw this happen. But some went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the leading priests and Pharisees called the high council together to discuss the situation. "What are we going to do?" they asked each other. "This man certainly performs many miraculous signs. If we leave Him alone, the whole nation will follow Him, and then the Roman army will come and destroy both our Temple and our nation." And one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said, "How can you be so stupid? Why should the whole nation be destroyed? Let this one man die for the people." (11:45-50)*

And John goes on to say that Caiaphas' statement was an unwitting prophetic word, guided by the Spirit of God, that Jesus would die for the nation, and far beyond to all nations on earth. From this point on, the religious leaders are now in serious plotting mode, looking for the opportunity to put Jesus to death, and, we find out in the next chapter, that they want to kill Lazarus as well. When you want to deny a miracle, get rid of the evidence.

In response to this, Jesus left the city and took His disciples to a place called Ephraim, 13 miles north and slightly east of Jerusalem. They stayed there until it was almost time for the Feast of Passover when they returned to Bethany - that's next week.

So what do we learn from John 11? What are the lessons that we can take home from this chapter?

1. Let's begin our application with a little lesson in Greek - I don't think you'll find this too hard . . . eipen aute ho Jesus, "Ego eimi he anastasis kai he zoe." (11:25a) The first part I'll translate for you; it's simply "Jesus said to her". Now, let's look at the rest: ego eimi = I am, or, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, I, I am. What is Jesus? He is 'he anastasis', the resurrection and 'he zoe', the life. Not just the resurrection, but the kind and quality of life that can never end, that is made for eternity. And not just the life, but the life that overcomes the power of death through resurrection - that is greater than death. Jesus is saying that without Him, there is no eternal life and no resurrection from the grave, but that with Him, there is no possibility that death can have the last word, that it will triumph in the end. In the second half of the verse, Jesus says that the person who believes into Him, who pursues Him in a trusting, faith-filled way, even though that person will someday die, they will never lose their life. And again, the root of the word He uses there is the zoe, eternal life. What John is trying to get us to see is that Jesus changes the whole picture of life and death. It can no longer be defined in naturalistic terms. Life is no longer to be limited to breathing and heartbeat because Jesus takes us into eternity with Him. He gives us this incredible gift of zoe, the gift that He had with the Father and which guaranteed that the tomb He would be laid in in just a few weeks would be unable to contain what belonged to Jesus. One more quick Greek lesson: the last two words of verse 25: apothane zesetai. Apothane means natural death, zesetai means life. Even though we will all die at some point in time, yet we will never be simply dead and gone. There is a life that comes into us which lights our path for the rest of our days, but also beyond that and into eternity. At the beginning of this series on John I said that the Prologue, the first half of chapter 1, provides the lens through which we can interpret the rest of the gospel. Listen to these words from the prologue: "Life itself was in Him (in Jesus), and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it." (1:4,5) We're never meant to think of what Jesus does for us as a temporary, earth-bound gift that ends when we end; it goes on and on and on in such joy and wonder and fullness of grace that we can hardly contain it.

2. The second application is simply to hang on to the words, the promises of Jesus, no matter how hard life gets or how long we have to wait. Jesus said to Martha, “Didn’t I tell you that you will see God’s glory if you believe?” That’s the big “if” of the Gospel of John. It’s repeated often and with so much attached to it. The good gifts of God are prepared for people who will believe that Jesus is who He said He is, that Jesus has the power to offer life to the full, that He is the Good Shepherd who leads us into green pastures and restores our souls, that Jesus is the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, that He satisfies the deep thirsts of our soul. Believe and keep believing and you will see the glory of God, over and over and over again, in joy, in peace, and in profound gratitude for all His blessings.