

Sermon Series Four: Believe and Live
(The Gospel of John: Signs of the Messiah - 1:1-12:50)
John 11:17-34
The Resurrection and the Life (Part Two)

We live in a world that increasingly shows a growing fear of death. Dr. John Ulrich, Professor of English at Mansfield University, says that the ever popular zombie fixation represents our fear of death." A recent article in the Wall Street Journal says, "By all observable metrics, zombies are totally hot right now." Another article claims that zombies have become "outrageously, staggeringly, mindblowingly popular ... Not only do they top best-seller lists and video games and the iPad, the undead dominate television, too." With nearly 16 million viewers, *The Walking Dead*, AMC's hit TV show about a world dominated by flesh-eating zombies, nearly outperformed the 2014 Winter Olympics. *World War Z*, a movie about a zombie apocalypse starring Brad Pitt, has so far grossed over \$540 million.

So what's the big deal with this zombie craze? Stephen Marche, of *Esquire* magazine writes in his article titled "*Why Zombies Are Everywhere Now:*" After seeing dozens of zombie movies, I'm convinced that the reason zombies are so powerful is that they capture an atheistic fear of the dead. I don't just mean the fear of dead bodies, though that fear is there, too ... materialistic atheism ... does not provide a very comforting way to deal with the dead. Christians and others have prayer and visions of an afterlife ... Atheists have rotting corpses and oblivion - and zombie movies. The unbelieving world has no answer to the sobering reality that this life could end at any moment.

But the wonderful truth is that death does not have to be the end of all man's hopes and dreams! Because Christ has conquered death, for the believer, death marks the beginning of a far better life in glorified perfection and perfect fellowship with Christ. By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus vividly demonstrated his power over death and is the hope for our culture obsessed with doing everything they can to ignore the thought of death or of the moment when death knocks at our door.

I want you to understand four realities concerning Jesus and your last moments or your family's before and after death:

I. He Will Be With You In Death. (11:17-19).

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem about 2 miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.

When Christ arrived at Lazarus' house he was most assuredly dead. He had been in the tomb for four days. Later Jewish sources attest the rabbinic belief that the spirit of a person who had died lingered over the corpse for three days, or until decomposition of the body had begun. Then the Spirit would abandon the body because there was no longer any hope of resuscitation. Only a divine miracle could restore him to life.

By the time Jesus arrives there is a large mourning party there. Many Jews had come from Jerusalem. The first seven days after someone died was an intense period of mourning. There would be frequent expressions of loud wailing and other dramatic displays of grief. This would be followed by 30 days of "light mourning." The fact that many Jews came from Jerusalem indicates the family enjoyed considerable social standing and wealth. Consequently, there would be a large group of people to witness this incredible miracle.

What I want you to realize is that Jesus came to the family of Lazarus at the perfect appointed time. And when you and your family go through a time of mourning, God promises that Christ will be there. The psalmist reminds us, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me." For Lazarus, who had already died, he already was experiencing being present with the Lord. Paul reminds us that, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." A split second after you are gone you will see the smile of your Savior's face. Jesus whispers "Fear not! I will be with you in death!"

II He Has Promised to Deliver You from Death (11:20-27)

So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if

you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, who is coming into the world.”

1. He comes with hope for your grief and shaken faith.

As we would expect, Martha runs to greet him as the ever active busy one, while Mary is quiet and contemplative. Her words reveal that she had enough faith to believe that Jesus could have kept Lazarus from dying, but they also betray a hint of disappointment at Jesus delay. She was confident that he had enough power to heal, but apparently does not believe that he had enough power to raise the dead. At least not yet!

Jesus responds to her understandable grief and shaken faith by saying, *“Your brother will rise again.”* He meant that Lazarus would be resurrected immediately, but she misunderstands. Her reaction implies that she is thinking, *“Of course he’ll rise again at the end of history, but what good is that for me now?”*

But as we reflect on Christ’s words, have we not often heard similar words also, *“You will see him or her again.”* We know that all the bodies of believers will rise again. And those bodies will be perfected in every way.

2. He promises with absolute certainty that death is not the end.

Jesus declares that he is the resurrection and the life and whoever believes in him will never die. But what exactly does this mean? *First, he is saying that he is the person who is both the overcomer of death and the sustainer of life.* When you are sick, you want a doctor and not a medical book or a formula. You want a person. When you are being sued, you want a lawyer and not a law book. Likewise, when you face your last enemy, death, you want the Savior and not a doctrine written in a book. In Jesus Christ, every doctrine is made personal. He, personally, will overcome your death and he is the one who sustains your life right

now. *Second, Jesus is saying that whoever believes in him will live even though he or she dies, and whoever lives and believes in him will never ever die.* Now that sound complicated! He is saying that physical death is merely a gateway to further life and fellowship with God in heaven. That is, everyone who believes in Jesus will never experience spiritual death - separation from God. All believers have eternal life. It is also true that even when you die physically your body will be raised on the last day. We could say it like this, “The one who believes in Christ, even though he or she dies physically, yet they will live physically - there will be a final resurrection. And whoever is spiritually alive and believes in Christ shall not die spiritually. They will forever experience uninterrupted intimacy and relationship with God. A split second after their spirit/soul leaves the body it will be in the presence of the Lord.

3. He brings understanding and increases your faith.

Christ asks Martha if she believes him. He wants to know if she believes that he is the source of resurrection power and eternal life. It is clear that Jesus’ words have had a dramatic impact of her. She does understand. Her confession of faith is a high point in John’s gospel. She clearly declares him to be the Messiah, the Son of God, the deliverer (the God-man) sent by God into the world. You too experience a growth in your faith as you come first into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and then into a deeper understanding of what the resurrection is all about. This faith will sustain you as you face your death or the death of a believing loved one.

III. He Feels the Pain of Your Sorrow in Death (11:28-36).

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “the Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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.” 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. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Apparently, Martha tried for this to be a private meeting or Christ may have intended to keep this a private visit rather than dealing with the public. But we are immediately impressed with the fact that Martha refers to Jesus as "the Teacher." In a world where contemporary rabbis regularly refused to instruct women, Jesus lovingly took a radically different approach. Mary comes with the same grief as Martha and falls down at Jesus feet. (Mary is found three times in the gospel record, and each time she is at the feet of Jesus. She sat at his feet and listened to his word; she fell at his feet and poured out her sorrow; and she would come later to his feet to give her praise and worship.)

Jesus initial reaction to her weeping, and the mourners who had followed her weeping, is one of indignation, anger, and turmoil. Obviously we wonder about what? The text does not tell us, but Christ possibly was angry at the misery that death inflicts on humanity and the loved ones of those who die, at the painful reality of sin and death. Then as they come to the tomb, Jesus weeps. Jesus' tears were probably generated both by his love for Lazarus and again by his grief over the deadly effects of sin on a fallen world. Christ clearly feels your pain and cares about you as you go through the process of grieving for those who have died. He understands your anger at our greatest enemy. He too knows what it is like to die and to see loved ones die.

The crowd reacts to Christ's tears in two ways. Some see them as precipitated by his great love for Lazarus, but others wrongfully conclude that he is grieving over his inability to prevent Lazarus from dying.

IV. His Promise of Resurrection Will Become a Reality (11:38-44)

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 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." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took

away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 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." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." 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."

Jesus' command is terse, reflecting a quiet persistent resolve: "Take away the stone." He is passionate, at this moment, about dealing death a deadly blow. Martha is repulsed by the idea since the Jews did not embalm the body and by now the aromatic spices placed on the body could no longer mask the odor of decay. She, like any of us, would be sickened by the sight and smell of a loved one's body in a state of decomposition and decay. I am quite sure that she believed that Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead, but that he would do so at the end of history - not now! Jesus replies that Lazarus death is an occasion for God's glory to be revealed. His resurrection would not only demonstrate Jesus' power over death but would foreshadow his raising of his own body from the dead.

Jesus stops and prays thanking the Father that he has already heard and granted his request. This resurrection was not for Jesus benefit, but for the benefit of the onlookers. It focused on Christ as being God's agent in performing the miracle and also demonstrated his intimate relationship with God - that he did nothing independently of the Father.

Christ then commands Lazarus to come out in a loud voice making it clear that this was not the mutterings of a sorcerer or magician (who often whispered their incantations and spells quietly). This was no magic but raw divine omnipotence. Lazarus immediately comes out of the tomb with his hands and feet bound with linen strips and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus tells the bystanders to unbind him and let him go. In involving the bystanders, they become undeniable witnesses to the power of Jesus over death. They have touched the resurrected body of Lazarus themselves.

The message to them and to us is that Jesus does not simply make promises, he keeps his promises. We can be absolutely certain that he will raise and glorify our bodies if we die before he comes again.

Conclusion

The great theologian Don Carson writes, “There is a school of thought in Christian circles that almost views death so much as a blessing that you are not allowed to cry [But in the Bible] death is an enemy, and it can be a fierce one It is ugly. It destroys relationships. It is to be feared. It is repulsive. There is something odious about death. Never pretend otherwise. But death does not have the last word Thank God for a Savior who could claim, "I am the resurrection and the life." For the Christian, when a believing loved one dies we need never say, “I will never see him again.” We who belong to Christ know that we’re only parted for a short while, and soon we’ll be together forever—home and free and rejoicing together in Jesus’ presence in never-ending and ever-increasing joy. And reminding one another of this promise tempers our grief with a hope that is deep and solid! Christ will walk with me and my onlooking loved ones during the hour and aftermath of my death. Christ had already promised that death is not the end of my or my believing loved one’s existence. Christ feels the sorrow and the anger that I experience at death. And Christ will keep his promise to raise my body from the death. His resurrection is the guarantee of that.