

John's Gospel - the Resurrection and the Life

by John Vissers

The story of Lazarus teaches us about the power of Jesus to overcome death and to give us eternal life through faith in him.

Duration: 41:35

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 11:1-44

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker explores the story of Lazarus' resurrection from the dead as told in John chapter 11. The speaker highlights the purpose of Jesus in the midst of death, emphasizing that Jesus had a plan and a purpose for what he did in this situation. The speaker also discusses the pain and humanity of Jesus, emphasizing that he can sympathize with our struggles and challenges. The sermon encourages listeners to have faith in Jesus and to trust in his plan, even when it may seem difficult or confusing.

Transcript

Our teaching tonight comes from John's Gospel, Chapter 11. I'll be reading from verses 1 to 44, and I invite you to follow along in your own Bibles as we hear God's Word this evening. Now, a man named Lazarus was sick.

He was from Bethany, the village of Mary, and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sister sent word to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick.

When he heard this, Jesus said, This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory, so that God's Son may be glorified through it. Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. Then he said to his disciples, Let us go back to Judea. But Rabbi, they said, A short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there? Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light.

It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light. After he had said this, he went on to tell them, Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up. His disciples replied,

Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.

Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.

But let us go to him. Then Thomas, called Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, If you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she told him. I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world. And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside.

The teacher is here, she said, and is asking for you. When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house comforting her noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

Where have you laid him? he asked. Come and see, Lord, they replied. Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, See how he loved him. But some of them said, Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying? Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

Take away the stone, he said. But, Lord, said Martha, the sister of the dead man, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days. Then Jesus said, Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone.

Then Jesus looked up and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, Did this Lazarus come out? The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, Take off the grave clothes and let him go. Amen. May God bless to us this reading from his word tonight.

Let us pray together. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, O God, in these moments be acceptable to you, our Lord, our strength, and our Redeemer. Through Christ our Lord we pray.

Amen. In John chapter 11, we meet three very good friends of Jesus. We meet Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus.

Mary and Martha also appear in one of the other Gospels, in Luke's Gospel in chapter 10, and in verses 38 to 42 there, where we're told more about their individual personalities and about their particular relationships with Jesus. And as well, here in John chapter 11, John the Gospel writer tells us, in retrospect, that Mary was the one who anointed Jesus with perfume, which is yet to occur in the next chapter, in John chapter 12, and in the opening eight verses there. Lazarus, however, we meet only in this chapter and in the twelfth chapter of John's Gospel.

And when he becomes sick, as the story unfolds, his sisters send word to Jesus, Lord, the one that you love is sick. And Jesus assures them, he responds by assuring them, that it's not the Father's purpose that Lazarus should die, but the purpose is that the glory of God might be seen, that the glory of God might be manifest, that the glory of God might be revealed in the Son, in the life and in the ministry and the person and in the work of Jesus. And again, this theme of the manifestation of the glory of God through the ministry of Jesus, which runs throughout the Gospel of John, comes to the forefront.

It was introduced to us already in the opening chapter of John's Gospel, John chapter 1 and verse 14. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have beheld his glory, the glory of the one and only begotten Son of the Father. And that idea of the manifestation of the glory of God, the revelation of God's glory, runs throughout the Gospel of John.

And here, Jesus says to the sister of Lazarus that this is going to happen, that indeed the glory of God might be seen in the Son. Now, John also tells us that Jesus loved Lazarus and that Jesus loved Mary and Martha, that there's a special relationship here, that they were good friends and there's some kind of a close relationship between them. And yet, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, the strange thing is that Jesus stays.

He decides to stay for two more days where he was. And as Jesus deliberately waits before making the trip to Lazarus' home in Bethany, the tension builds. And in the meantime, we begin to understand that Lazarus dies.

Now finally, then, Jesus decides that it's time to go to Bethany. But it's interesting that his disciples counsel against it. And they counsel against it because of the hostility of the religious leaders, of the religious authorities.

They know that Jesus is going to Bethany, which is close to Jerusalem. And by going to Bethany, which is close to Jerusalem, he's putting himself again within the sphere, within the orbit of the religious leaders who were by this time out to get him, who were trying to kill him. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

If Lazarus is dead, why bother now going to a place of danger? Jesus responds enigmatically. He says, Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.

And as with many of the statements of Jesus, this can be read on more than one level. On the surface, when you first look at this statement, what Jesus seems to be saying is that he must carry out his ministry now while there is time. Now while there is opportunity.

His time is limited, and nothing should stand in the way of his accomplishing the purpose that God has for his life and for his ministry. But on a deeper level, he's also speaking of himself as the light. Those who walk with Jesus will walk in the light.

They will be led through life without stumbling. They will find light to lead them through the darkest valleys. Those who choose to walk with Jesus, to follow Jesus, will not stumble.

And again, this theme of light, which has been so prominent in John's Gospel, emerges yet again. Then if we go on to verses 11 to 14, we see another double meaning which occurs. Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep and that he is going to Bethany to wake him up.

Now although sleep was a common euphemism for death, the disciples don't pick up what Jesus is saying. They don't understand what he's saying. They, in fact, misunderstand.

In the context, in fact, of what has happened, their response seems somewhat absurd. They reason that if Lazarus is simply asleep, then he will recover. And their confusion then allows Jesus to confirm that Lazarus has, in fact, died.

That Lazarus is dead. And it allows Jesus to state the purpose that they're going to have an opportunity yet even to place faith in him as the Son of God again. Jesus is going to do something so that the faith of the disciples might be strengthened.

If Jesus had merely healed Lazarus, the same purpose might not have been accomplished. But what we have here, in fact, is the last and really the supreme sign in John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus is the last of the seven signs in John's Gospel. And we've seen these as we've made our way through the Gospel of John.

There are these signs which are miracles which Jesus performs. And they're performed not simply so that there will be a sensational kind of revelation, but in fact that people might see these as signs and place their faith in Jesus. They are done so that people may believe in Jesus and have life in his name.

That's the reason for the signs throughout the Gospel of John. And now the raising of Lazarus is the last and the climactic sign. It is really the epitome, the high point of all of these signs.

The miracles of Jesus are signs of who he is and what he has come to do. And the raising of Lazarus is going to be the greatest sign because it is going to point people to the reality that he himself is the resurrection and the life, the reality of the resurrection life that Jesus offers to all. But this story is also a sign in another sense.

And I don't want us to miss the irony of this. Because at this point, Thomas says that the disciples should go with Jesus and notice what he says, let us go with him that we may also die with him. Now it's not clear whether Thomas here is making a statement which is an expression of faith and an expression of support for Jesus or whether it's just resignation.

Whether it's a kind of statement of cynicism. He's determined to go to Bethany. He's determined to put himself close to Jerusalem.

He's determined to put himself within the sphere of the religious leaders again. Let us go with him so that we might die with him. Whatever the case, Thomas sees what lies ahead.

He sees the cross. He sees the death of Jesus. He sees the danger.

And the irony is this. The irony of the 11th chapter of John's Gospel is that Jesus uses his power to raise Lazarus from the dead, to raise a dead man to life. It is the epitome of the signs, the miraculous signs in the Gospel of John.

And by that very action, by raising Lazarus from the dead, what he does is he accelerates plans for his own death. Because after the resurrection of Lazarus, after Lazarus is raised from the dead, after this miracle, the religious leaders are determined now. There is no turning back.

They must eliminate this Jesus. He has to go. And so this very sign that points to life, that points to the life that Jesus brings into the world, is the very sign that propels the religious leaders to put in place the very motions for his arrest, for his trial, and for his crucifixion.

Now, when Jesus arrives, Lazarus, it says, had already been in the tomb for four days. He's dead, and he's buried. Now, you need to understand that in the first century Jewish death practices, the body was buried without embalming on the day of death, and the mourning lasted for 30 days.

And the four days are important, because the rabbis taught that the soul of a dead person remains at the grave site for three days. And for three days, it's possible still that this person might be resuscitated, that there's this soul that is yearning to return to the body. But by the fourth day, the soul has now departed, and there is no possibility whatsoever of resuscitation or of life.

And so by the fourth day, any hope for Lazarus' resurrection, any hope for his resuscitation, would have been gone. He was dead. Jesus had arrived too late.

There was no possibility that Lazarus would come back to life, or so they thought, and they all knew it. It's interesting that both Mary and Martha have faith in Jesus' ability to heal, in Jesus' power, but their hope had given way now to regret. Both women told Jesus that, Jesus, if you had just come earlier, if you had just been here earlier, then our brother might not have died.

And Martha, in fact, expresses faith that Jesus can still do something. When Jesus says that Lazarus will rise again, notice what she says. She affirms her faith in the general resurrection from the dead at the end of time.

She knows that there will be a time when Lazarus will be raised from the dead, and she thinks this is what Jesus is referring to. But Jesus gives her more hope than that. Speaking to Martha, Jesus utters the fifth of the I Am sayings.

Notice again the I Am sayings, these great statements, which point to the revelation of Jesus as the great I Am. I Am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.

And everyone who believes and believes in me will never die. It's interesting here because Martha had faith in what Jesus could do. She believed that Jesus had power.

She believed that Jesus could heal. She believed that Jesus could perform miracles. And Martha also had faith in the resurrection, that there would come a time when her brother Lazarus would, in fact, be raised from the dead again at the end of time.

But what Jesus has done now is he's taken these two realities. He's taken the faith of Martha, and he's moved it now to a higher plane. And what he's really saying is if she really believes in him, if she really believes that he has power, if she really believes that he is the Son of God, if she really believes that her brother will be raised again, if she believes that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, then this faith that she has in what is going to happen in the future will be fast-forwarded and will take place now, that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and can raise even the dead.

And she confesses that he is the Son of God. At the tomb, then, as we come to the tomb with all the mourners present, Jesus himself, it says, is deeply moved, and he's troubled. His feelings aren't explained for us.

Most likely, Jesus was disturbed at the pain and the loss of the destructive powers of death working in the life of his friend. He wept openly. He wept over the grave of a friend.

He grieved in the face of death itself. Some commentators suggest that why Jesus was really weeping was because the people didn't seem to have faith that he was able to do anything. But it seems to me that what's really going on here is that Jesus is confronting death directly.

He's facing death. He's facing it head-on in the reality of the death of a close friend. And at the tomb, Jesus orders the stone to be rolled away.

And Martha objects. Lazarus has been dead for four days. She says, the stench, the odor will be unbearable.

And it would also be a violation of Jewish burial practice because Jewish burial practice entailed a number of things. First, the corpse was completely wrapped in linen. It would be laid down on a stone shelf or table to decompose.

And then a year later, the mourners would reenter the tomb, gather the bones, and deposit them in urns that were then placed in cavities carved in the walls of the tomb. And what would happen, you see, is several generations would thus share the same tomb. And at this point, after four days, the body would have begun to decompose.

And even more, it would have been repulsive. But even more than repulsive, it would have been ritually impure. It would have gone against every practice, every Jewish practice of the first century to open the tomb at that point.

But Jesus reminds Martha of the promise of faith. She would see the glory of God. She would see the glory of God.

And so now we've reached the moment. They take the stone away. The text says that Jesus prays to the Father, not for his own sake, but for the sake of those who are present.

And when he finished praying, Jesus called out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. Three words. Lazarus, he calls by name, come out.

And just as in John chapter 10, the sheep know the voice of the good shepherd, so Lazarus responds to the call of Jesus. And he walks out of the tomb. And he's released from his grave clothes.

He's alive again. Jesus has set him free from the power of death. It's an astonishing miracle.

And in a way, as John tells it, he almost understates it somehow. The astonishing reality that this dead man is raised to life. And of course, this miracle has provoked considerable controversy.

Those who work with a closed universe where natural laws reign simply dismiss this story as pure legend. The fact of the matter is, dead people just don't come back to life. It doesn't happen.

But the Gospel doesn't see it that way. The Gospel sees it quite differently. And as the Gospel tells this astonishing story, it reminds us of a number of things, it seems to me, that are important and applicable to our own lives and to our own faith and to our own pathway of discipleship as we seek to follow Jesus.

And so let me very quickly draw just three applications. Having heard the story, I hope, with fresh ears, having heard it anew, let me just very briefly draw three applications from this marvelous passage, this marvelous story in John chapter 11. The first thing is this.

We discover something, it seems to me, about the purpose of Jesus in the midst of death. The purpose of Jesus in the midst of death. The first thing we notice here is that Jesus had a purpose and a plan for doing what he did in this situation.

If you think about it, to some his actions are strange. His actions don't really make sense. When we get the news that a close friend or a family member is dying, most of us would drop what we're doing immediately and rush to the place where they are.

I remember in August 1997 when I got the word, the telephone call, from one of my uncles that my grandfather was in hospital, that he was laboring with pneumonia, amongst other things, and that he wasn't expected to live for more than a couple more days. And I dropped what I was doing, and I got in the car, and I drove down to the Niagara Peninsula, and I was able then to see my grandfather, although he was unconscious, to get there before he died. Jesus, the text says, waited two days, and by then, by the time the two days were over, he knew that Lazarus had died.

And it only begins to make sense when you see that Jesus had something greater in mind. He knew that the sickness of Lazarus would not end in death, not ultimately. That the death of Lazarus was for God's glory, so that God's Son could be glorified through it.

This was going to be a great sign. And it was going to be a moment of revelation. It was going to be a moment of resurrection.

It was going to be a moment of great faith, a moment of power, a moment of life for Lazarus, and for those who had come to believe in Jesus through the raising of Lazarus from the dead. And as difficult as it is for us to accept, the first thing I want to suggest by way of application is that the real power of God is often experienced by us in the midst of the shadows. The Lord may not always dance to our tune.

The Lord may not always do things according to our timing or in the ways that we think make sense to us. Sometimes it may seem as if he is withholding his goodness. Sometimes it may seem as if he's turned his face away from us.

He may not answer prayer when we want him to answer prayer. He may not answer prayer in the way that we expect him to answer prayer. But despite it all, the Lord has a purpose.

The Lord has a plan. He knows what he is doing. He has a purpose, and he is at work in us accomplishing his will.

And you have to imagine that it was extremely difficult for Mary and Martha to come to accept that. But the interesting thing is they did accept it. And they did believe it.

They had faith in Jesus. If many of us had been in Martha and Mary's shoes, and if Jesus had done to us what he did to them, we might have turned away. We might have said to Jesus, you're not really a friend.

You obviously don't really care. We might turn our back away. But that's not what they did.

They continued to count on Jesus. And that's a lesson for us all, a lesson that we need to take to heart. The second application that I want to draw from this story is simply this, that we see something of the pain and the humanity of Jesus in the midst of death.

This passage uncovers for us a Jesus who is fully human, who can sympathize with us. The word sympathy literally means who feels along with us. This passage points to a Savior who fully identifies himself with human beings, even in death itself, even in grief, one who shares our feelings.

He stood with Mary and Martha in their grief. He felt their pain deeply. He stood among those who mourned at the graveside.

And we have in the 35th verse, the shortest verse in the Bible, Jesus wept. Here you have the Son of God, the one who left his throne in glory, the one who took on flesh and lived among us so that we might behold that glory. And what do we have? We have a Savior, a Son of God, who stands at the grave of a friend and who weeps.

He doesn't paper over the reality of this death. The death of Lazarus was real, and he's plunged into the depths of agony with those he loved. Oh, he has a plan, and he has a purpose for it all, but he does not minimize the reality of the experience that all of those are going through.

He walks with them through the valley of the shadow of death. And what I want to suggest to you is, yes, the Lord has a purpose, and yes, the Lord has a plan, but in the midst of the working out of that purpose and that plan, he walks with us even when the shadows lengthen. He walks with us even when he's working out his purposes for us in the midst of it all.

When we face suffering and death, Jesus does not paper over it as if it doesn't matter. And that's the way, of course, Christians sometimes want to deal with the reality of suffering and death, that somehow it's not real, but death is ugly. It scares us all.

No one escapes its curse. And Jesus enters into the fullness of the experience with us. You see, the power of the gospel, the power of the Christian faith, is that it does not paper over the reality of death.

It does not back away from it. But it points to a Savior who stands with us in the midst of it all, and that's what makes Christian faith such a vital hope in the midst of it all, that Jesus is faithful even in the midst of death itself. You see, Jesus knows that deep within all of us fear death.

And Jesus knows and feels what it's like to lose a loved one. Jesus knows what it's like to face death itself. And Jesus is not a long-distance Savior who calls in salvation from afar.

He stands with us in the midst of it all. Samuel Johnson told of his horror at the death of a friend, and this is what he said, At the sight of his last conflict, I felt a sensation never known to me before, a confusion of passions, an awful stillness of sorrow, a gloomy terror without a name. Jesus knows what that's like.

He knows it all. And then, thirdly, I want to suggest to you by way of application that this passage, this astonishing miracle, points us to the power of Jesus in the midst of death. You see, the real hope is that Jesus is revealed in this passage not just as the Lord of life, but as the Lord of death itself, over death.

He is Lord of death in the fullness of his power. He can undo the dissolution and the decay. And Lazarus is raised by the word of his power, the same voice that spoke and called creation into existence.

In the beginning, God spoke and there was, is the same voice that speaks and calls Lazarus and says, Lazarus, come out. And in the midst of death, there is life, that creative and re-creative work of the living God. The fact of the matter is that since the fall, death is the universal fact and the final horizon that conditions all of our dreams, that conditions all of our lives, that conditions all of our decisions, that conditions all of our purposes.

And sooner or later, we all experience the numbing shock of bereavement and the long shadow that it casts over the future. And of course, it's horrific when we lose a loved one, when someone close to us dies. But the reality is that that even points us to the deeper and harder reality that sooner or later, we will all face death ourselves.

From a human perspective, of course, from the perspective of non-faith, there is only one thing to say, that's life. C'est la vie, it's going to be over one day. We might as well get used to it.

But the hope of this story, of this passage in the Gospel of John, is that it reminds us that Jesus makes all the difference in how we understand and experience and look at death itself. Consider these two testimonies. The first one is by Bertrand Russell, who viewed death from the perspective of unbelief, an atheist.

He says this, There is darkness without, and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendor, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment, and then nothing. Then here are these words by a man named Colebrooker, a great 19th century Lutheran theologian and preacher.

He said, When I die, I do not die anymore. However, when someone finds my skull, let this skull preach to him and say, I have no eyes, nevertheless I see him. Though I have no lips, I kiss him.

I have no tongue, yet I sing praise to him with all who call upon his name. I am a hard skull, yet I am wholly softened and melted by his love. I lay here exposed on God's acre, yet I am there in paradise.

All suffering is gone, for his great love has done this for us, when for us he carried his cross and went out to Golgotha. You see, the power of Jesus makes all the difference. It is the difference between hope and despair, between life and between nothingness.

David Hume, the philosopher and skeptic, not only lost his early Christian faith, but even led his mother into skepticism. And the story is told that when his mother lay on her deathbed, she called her noted son,

this great philosopher, to her bedside and said, Son, you have taken away my faith, and now as I face my dying moment, you have nothing to give me in its stead. What a horrible way to face death.

A couple of years ago, I went through a period of doubt in my own life. We all go through those periods of doubt and those dark nights of the soul. And one of the things that brought me through that, that brought me through that time, was coming to terms with the reality of death.

I had to come to terms with the fact that I'm going to die one day, and that everyone that I love is going to die one day. And the question that loomed before me then was simply this question, what can I hope for in the face of that reality? When you realize that you're going to die, and when you realize that everyone you love, everyone who's close to you, is going to die one day, that death is for everyone, that no one escapes the curse, the question is, what can you hope for in the face of it? What will sustain you in the face of it? What will give you strength and hope to carry on in the face of it? In the midst of the frailty and the shortness and often the seeming meaninglessness of life. And I came to the conclusion, by God's grace, through faith, that when Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die, that Jesus meant it.

And that it's true. And when you come to that point in your life, when you realize that in the midst of life, and in the midst of death, Jesus is the resurrection and the life, you come to a new place of faith, and a new place of hope, and a new place of love. I simply want to close tonight by asking you the question that Jesus asked Martha.

Do you believe this? Every one of you sitting here tonight is going to die. It may be within a few short days, it may be within a few short months, it may be years from now. But every one of us is going to die.

Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? This is the hope in which we live, and it's the hope in which we die. In the quietness of this moment, perhaps some of you want to do business with God. Father, we thank you tonight that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

We thank you for the hope of the gospel. We thank you for the truth, this basic, foundational, powerful truth that without you there is no hope and no life, but with you hope and life abound. So we confess and acknowledge that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Send us forth with the assurance of faith this night we pray. Amen.

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