

“I Am the Resurrection and the Life”

The Thirty-Sixth in a Series on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 11:17-27; Isaiah 26:1-21

There is nothing worse than getting the horrible news that someone we know or love has died. First comes the initial sense of shock and grief as we try to process the news. Then come the intermittent and alternating waves of grief and reflection. When someone dies, preparations must be made, family and friends begin to assemble, and then comes one of the worst times of all of human existence, the funeral. Although Christians grieve just like non-Christians grieve, one thing separates us from non-Christians. Christians grieve as people with great hope because we know that Jesus Christ has conquered death and the grave, because he is the resurrection and the life. We also know that those whom we bury are in the presence of the Lord, awaiting that glorious moment when the last trumpet sounds, and the dead in Christ are raised bodily from the dead. In John chapter 11, we witness Jesus deal with the death of his dear friend Lazarus, and we learn that the thing we dread most—death and the tomb—is no match for the power of Jesus, who turns Lazarus’ funeral into a magnificent glimpse of what is yet to come for all those who trust in him as savior from sin. But before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, we read of a remarkable encounter between Jesus and Lazarus’ sister Martha, in which Martha makes a profound profession of faith—a profession grounded in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the body at the end of the age, an event which is our ultimate hope as well.

As we make our way into John 11, we come to that passage which is read at the beginning of most Christian funerals. When Jesus says in verses 25-26, “*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die*” our Lord offers words which are a wonderful comfort to those who are grieving. But these words present a very difficult challenge to Martha to whom the words are originally addressed. The reason these words are a comfort to us is that we know how the account of Jesus and his friend Lazarus turns out in the end. Jesus walks up to the tomb and commands “Lazarus, come out,” and the dead man does. We know that when Jesus dies on a Roman cross, he will be raised by the power of God before he ascends into heaven. But when Jesus spoke these words to Martha, Lazarus is still in his tomb—in fact, he has been dead for four days, and as we learn in verse 39, the surest sign of the curse stemming from Adam’s sin, decomposition, has already begun. What can Jesus mean when he says he is “the resurrection and the life” when the man he loved lies buried but a short distance away?

These words from Jesus are difficult for Martha to accept because of the circumstances set out in the first sixteen verses of the chapter. Jesus was still east of the Jordan river—having left Jerusalem for the wilderness, because the Jews were plotting to arrest Jesus if he remained in Jerusalem. While still in the wilderness, word came to Jesus from Mary and Martha of Bethany—a small village two miles to the east of Jerusalem—that Mary and Martha’s brother, Lazarus, is quite ill. The family requests that Jesus come as soon as possible, although Bethany is more than a full day’s walk from the area where Jesus was staying. Lazarus, Mary, and Martha are well-known to Jesus. Jesus is said to love them, and they regard Jesus as a close friend. It is likely that Jesus visited their home often (and perhaps even stayed with this family) during his trips to Jerusalem.

When Jesus gets word of Lazarus’ illness, Jesus seems coldly indifferent to Lazarus’ plight, and even stays two additional days east of the Jordan, before suddenly announcing that time has come for him to return to Jerusalem (and to Bethany). The disciples were very worried about what might happen when

Jesus returns to Jerusalem because the Jews were threatening to arrest him, and if arrested, it was very likely that Jesus would be put to death. If Jesus intended to go back to Jerusalem all along, why did he not rush to Bethany in time to heal his friend? Why did he wait two additional days, and only then decide to go back to Bethany? After using the time to explain his disciples that his hour is indeed drawing near and that his timing is not ours, Jesus suddenly tells them that *“Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”*

Why was Jesus glad that Lazarus has died? Why was this of benefit to the disciples? The disciples were still confused about Jesus’ earlier statement in verse 4 that *“this illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”* The disciples do not expect that Jesus would raise his friend-although they should have. Based upon the several Old Testament examples we considered last time of the dead being raised, and given the fact that Jesus had already raised two people from the dead (Jarius’ daughter and the son of the widow of Nain), the disciples should have understood that the only way Lazarus’ illness would not end in death is if Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. In fact, the disciples gave the possibility of a resurrection so little consideration that initially they understood Jesus to be saying that if Lazarus just got sufficient rest, he would recover. And much of their confusion, no doubt, stems from the fact that these men knew Lazarus well, loved him dearly, and were grief-stricken at the news of his death. But no one expected what was to follow, even though all of the signs were there. This was going to be a funeral like no other.

When we pick up with our text (vv.17-27), the scene shifts from the wilderness east of the Jordan River, to Bethany just outside Jerusalem. The shift in location means that Jesus’ hour is drawing near, because this is the last trip he will make to Jerusalem before the annual Passover celebration, now just days away. It is here in Bethany that Jesus performs his seventh and greatest sign—raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. And it is here that Jesus will be anointed messianic king by Mary before entering Jerusalem in triumph on Palm Sunday. The shift in location from east of the Jordan to Bethany doesn’t seem like much, but it is huge in redemptive-historical terms. By heading back to the Jerusalem area just before the Passover, Jesus’ is fulfilling his father’s will, and as the events of chapters 11-12 unfold (the hour draws near), it becomes clear that Jesus will soon die as the true Passover lamb, paying for the guilt of the sins of his people and turning aside God’s anger toward sin.

In verse 17, John tells us, *“now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.”* When Jesus first received news of Lazarus’ death, he decided to remain for two more days in the wilderness, before heading for Bethany (a trip which took more than a day). By the time Jesus reaches Bethany, Lazarus has been buried four days. From John’s account, it is apparent that Lazarus was well-loved and many people in the area knew him and his family. As we read in verses 18-19, *“Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.”* The implication is that the visitors who have come to Martha and Mary’s home to pay their respects, are mostly people who lived in Jerusalem. The fact that so many Jews came out to Bethany, is a good indication that this was a prominent family, and that these are the very people who will soon witness Jesus’ seventh miraculous sign.

We get a hint at Jesus’ relationship to this family, as well as the different personalities of the two sisters in Luke 10:38-42. There we read, *“now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but*

one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” The famous labels applied to Christian women throughout the centuries comes from this passage. “So and so is a Mary” because she is more interested in learning. Or “so and so is a Martha” because she is more interested in serving. I’ve heard way too many bad sermons in my life about why women should be more like one or the other of these two.

The same family dynamic is present here in John 11. As we read in verse 20, “*So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.*” If you’ve been to a large family funeral, a wake, or sat “shivah,” you can easily imagine the scene in the home. Lazarus would have been embalmed with spices and wrapped in burial clothes at the time he died. He would have been placed in the family tomb that same day, or early the next morning if the preparations took place at night. After the burial, friends of the family (and relatives) prepared a large meal, visitors came by throughout the period of mourning (*shivah*—seven days), and the family would frequently visit the tomb bringing more spices.

During the period of mourning, people sat in the family home visiting, consoling the grieving, and praying for one another. If you have seen news images from tragedies in the middle east and witnessed people loudly wailing, this too went on—especially upon receiving the news of the death, or at the time of burial. Mourners wore “mourning” clothes, with no Jewelry, and no bright colors. The family remained in mourning for three weeks, and they abstained from most social activities for a year-long period of mourning. Death was a big deal and mourning was a well-established social custom.¹

Because he knew Lazarus as a close friend, Jesus was expected to make an appearance, pay his respects, and mourn with the family. Although having someone with such fame attend your *shivah* was an honor, it was also a time of great tension, because Jesus was quite near Jerusalem where he could expect to be arrested. No doubt, the disciples and friends of the family feared that if Jesus came to Bethany and joined the mourners in the family home, the Jewish authorities might show up and seek to arrest him—and no one wanted that.

Martha sees (or hears a commotion) indicating that Jesus is approaching, and so she leaves the house and runs to meet him. According to verse 21, “*Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’*” Martha believes that Jesus has the power to heal the sick—she had not seen Jesus raise the dead as the disciples had—but nevertheless she expresses complete confidence in Jesus. If only he had been here, no doubt, he would have kept Lazarus from dying. She goes on to tell Jesus—in what amounts to a remarkable confession of faith in Jesus’ person and work—“*but even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.*” Martha is not expecting that Jesus will raise her brother from the dead, yet she fully believes that Jesus has such a strong relationship to YHWH, that whatever Jesus seeks in prayer, the Father will give him. It is remarkable that she mentions this particular aspect of Jesus’ messianic mission—only someone who knew Jesus well and had watched him closely would notice such a thing. John’s point is that despite Martha’s grief, she remains confident that if Jesus had been there, he could have prevented her brother from dying.

Jesus responds to her profession of faith with a remarkable declaration. “*Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’*” The fact of the general resurrection was not an issue for Martha, who held to the orthodox view of the Pharisees that on the last day, God was going to raise the dead—something which

¹ Craig S. Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 292.

the Sadducees denied. *“Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’”* Martha has not the slightest doubt that Lazarus will be raised from the dead on the last day. She knows that she will see her brother again. But she doesn’t yet realize that Jesus is promising her something more than the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. Martha was not present when Jesus learned of Lazarus’ illness, and when Jesus said her brother’s illness was not going to end in death—although we don’t know if Jesus sent such a word back to the family when the messengers from Mary and Martha came to him. Martha, like the disciples, simply does not expect Jesus to raise Lazarus *now*. He’s been dead four days—everyone has already accepted that as a fact. A bodily resurrection from the dead was completely beyond all human expectation.

In verses 25-26 *“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.’”* This is simply a remarkable statement. The most obvious thing about it is that once again Jesus uses the *ego emi* formula (“I Am”), which is one of YHWH’s own self-designations. This time he uses YHWH’s self-designation in connection with the resurrection. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus had spoken of the resurrection of the dead on the last day as an act performed by YHWH (the Father), and yet as something in which he (Jesus) participates. It is important to consider these earlier statements in order to catch the impact of what Jesus says here.

In John 5:21, Jesus declared, *“for as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.”* Then in John 5:25-29, Jesus went on to say, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”*

Later on, in John 6:39-40, the Bread of Life discourse, Jesus said, *“and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”* What Jesus has ascribed to the Father—the act of giving life and raising the dead—he now claims for himself. He not only speaks as YHWH (“I Am”), but he will do what YHWH does—raise the dead and give people life. These two things (the resurrection of the body and the giving of eternal life) are complementary. Jesus is the one who will raise the dead on the last day, and he is the one who gives life—i.e., eternal life, regeneration, but only to those *“who believe in him.”*

Jesus has been slowly and progressively revealing who he is—that he is the one promised throughout the Old Testament. This can be seen in the fact that the bodily resurrection of the dead (the general resurrection on the last day) is taught throughout the Old Testament and tied by the prophets to the messianic age. In what is, perhaps, the oldest book of the Bible, Job declares *“oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God”* (Job 19:23-26).

As we saw last time, in the twelfth chapter of his prophecy Daniel foretells of the end as follows. *“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who*

sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

As we saw in verses 19-21 of our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah sees the messianic age as a time of great rejoicing because the curse of death is removed—the culmination of the messianic age. *“Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by. For behold, the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain.”*

For the Jews of Jesus’ day (who sided with the Pharisees against the Sadducees), when the Messiah came, everything promised by Israel’s prophets regarding the end of the age will come to pass. The Messiah would restore the nation to its former greatness (which, to the folks mourning in Martha’s living room, meant defeating the Romans and extending Israel’s empire to the same boundaries as in the days of Solomon). Messiah would liberate God’s people from all foreign oppressors (which meant a complete if unlikely military victory over Rome—the greatest empire in world history to that time). Then, on YHWH’s behalf, Messiah will raise the dead and bring about the final judgment (according to a person’s deeds), with the righteous entering eternal life and the unrighteous entering eternal punishment.

And now here stands Jesus telling Martha that he is one with YHWH (“I Am”), that he will raise the dead and give eternal life. More importantly, for her, he will raise her brother from the dead. Because we know how this turns out in the end, we hear Jesus’ words as a great comfort when we learn of the death of someone we love. But consider for a moment how Martha heard these words, especially with her beloved brother dead and reeking from four days of decomposition. These words from Jesus are a real challenge to her, because they are a revelation of a mystery long hidden in Israel’s prophets. And lest we overlook the obvious, Jesus makes this revelation to a woman (not to his disciples), and to a member of a family whom he loves, and who is in the midst of a period of profound and deep grief.

When Jesus asks her *“do you believe this?”* in verse 27, Martha gives one of the most profound professions of faith found in all the New Testament. *“She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.’”* This woman believes that Jesus is the Messiah (the Christ), that is he is the Son of God (that he has a divine origin, even though he’s fully human), and that he has come to bring about everything Israel’s prophets said would come. Of all of the people whom we have met in John’s Gospel so far, Martha is far and away, the best theologian in the bunch. She has just professed her trust in everything Jesus as revealed so far. She has no doubt!

But Martha does not mention Lazarus being raised from the dead—only that she believes that Jesus is the promised one, who would raise the dead (which would include Lazarus) at the end of the age in accordance with Jesus’ teaching and Old Testament prophetic expectation. That Jesus was about to raise her own brother still has not dawned on her. Such a thing was simply too wonderful to expect. But as we will see next time, when Jesus sees Lazarus’ family and friends weeping, and then he sees for himself the tomb where his dear friend has been buried, Jesus weeps. And we will see that the one who hates death so much, also has the power to undo it. And so next time, we will read of Jesus approaching the tomb, raising his friend, and releasing him from the cold captivity of death.

What then, do we take with us from a passage such as this? Because the story of Jesus raising Lazarus

from the grave is so compelling on its own right we can easily overlook what this event means in the broad sweep of redemptive history. When Adam sinned, the human race came under the curse—death and the grave. Death is humanity’s greatest enemy. Although we do our best to hide the dead behind walls, and in places which look like serene pastures, the fact of the matter is God created us for life, not for death. And so when death comes, we see the curse in all its ugliness. And this is why funerals are so terrible. Not only do we grieve the loss of someone we love, we re-live the countless funerals we’ve attended before and we often think of those whom we have buried previously. And, if the truth be known, when we attend a funeral and grieve at someone else’s death we certainly think of our own death and wonder how we will die, and how our own death will effect others.

All of this comes from the curse. And so when the Old Testament prophets foretell of a time when the dead will be raised bodily (not as eternal vapors or as disembodied spirits) this tells us several things. First, human history has a goal—the last day, when God judges the world, raises the dead, and restores this fallen creation through a new heaven and earth, now the home of righteousness. Therefore, as Christians, who believe this to be true, we live this life with one eye on the horizon, knowing that everything we do in this life matters, and that one day God will right all wrongs and put an end to all evil doers. As Christians, we reject the defiant Nietzschean battle cry *carpe deum* (“seize the day”) which means “live life in the here and now” because the morality of the past is completely irrelevant, and there is no future judgment in the sense we just described. All the pagans around us can do is “live in the now.” When one of them dies, all they can do is “celebrate a life,” because mourning a death is to admit the fact that they’ve been denying reality, and to accept the Christian teaching that there is a final judgment in which the entire human race will be judged against the standard of God’s holy law. And that is not good news for all those who reject the saving death and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. No wonder then, why so many of our contemporaries don’t want to face death, or the possibility that this life is not all there is.

Don’t get me wrong, death often brings an end to suffering, and it certainly means an end to our sinning. There is a certain blessing when a believer dies that is worth noting, and I’m not saying all death is equally tragic. But I am saying that death is not natural to human existence. Death is the result of the curse. That Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden is proven every time we get the dreaded night-time phone call, or the ominous email or text message bringing us the worst possible news. The Jews of Jesus’ day understood this. That is why when news came that their friend Lazarus died, the Jews grieved, they mourned, they cried, they even wailed. Then they buried their dead, sought to honor the dead’s memory knowing that on the last day, the all the dead would be raised and God’s people would be reunited. Martha knew she would see her brother again. She knew too that if Jesus had been there, he could have healed him.

Martha does not know it yet, but when Jesus says to her, “*I am the resurrection and the life*” he is about win a major battle in the final defeat of death and the grave. Jesus is about to give all those attending the funeral of Lazarus a glimpse of what will happen on that glorious day when the trumpet sounds and the dead in Christ are raised. Jesus is going to walk to Lazarus’ tomb and raise bodily a man who has been dead four days. And then, in but a few days, he himself will die on a cross to pay for the guilt of our sins, only to be raised from the dead three days later. This is what Jesus means when he says, “*I am the resurrection and the life.*”

And so, the same question which Jesus asked Martha, he now asks all of us. “*Do you believe this?*”