

**Sermon Series: Summer Reading**  
**Sermon Title: I Am Resurrection and Life**  
**John 11**

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If you don't like spoiler alerts, hopefully you didn't hear Jason Byassee preach last week because he totally stole my thunder when he concluded his sermon so beautifully with the story we're about to hear today. There's a part of me that just wants to just play the audio of the last two minutes of Jason's sermon and say, "Amen!" But God gave me a few more words for this week.

As we continue our summer reading series through the gospel of John, today we hear the story of Lazarus – brother of Mary and Martha, and dear friend of Jesus. I'd guess most of you know the story, but I'm going to ask you to pretend this morning like you don't. We'll read the story in sections, and I invite you to follow along as John unfolds it for us as if you're hearing it for the first time.

I mentioned a couple weeks ago that John particularly emphasizes in his gospel that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, sent by God to save the world. John points out many miraculous signs Jesus did, and today's sign is the culmination of them all. But John tells this sign story differently from how he narrates the other signs. John takes a long time building up to the big reveal, because he wants to make sure we understand the life-altering implications of this miraculous sign before Jesus actually makes it happen. Listen with anticipation now as John sets the stage for the greatest of all miracles.

***John 11:1** Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. **2** Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.*

***3** So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." **4** But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." **5** Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, **6** after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

Let's pause right there. We learn a lot in this opening paragraph. Lazarus, someone Jesus loves, is sick. John mentions it three times in three verses, so it's definitely not looking good for Lazarus. But his sisters, Mary and Martha, believe Jesus can do something about it. And belief is a powerful thing, as John's gospel often proclaims. So the sisters send word to Jesus, who isn't too far away. Jesus has a curious response. He says the illness won't lead to death but rather to God's glory. And then even though he loves Lazarus and his sisters, Jesus stays put for two whole days!

Imagine you're living this story alongside the disciples. Someone you know and love is deathly ill, and someone else you know and love just might have the power to help. Wouldn't you want to just grab Jesus and say, "*What are you waiting for? Do something!*"

Some of you don't have to imagine what that feels like at all. You've been in situations (or you might be right now) where all you want to do is cry out to God, "*Do something!*" And yet it seems like God is silent. Inactive. Nowhere to be found. Or worse yet, unconcerned with your situation. What do you think God is doing during those times? I wish I knew. God's ways are not our ways. And waiting on God is one of the most difficult aspects of discipleship.

After waiting around for two days, Jesus finally says, "Let's go. Lazarus is sleeping and I'm going to wake him up." The disciples don't quite realize the severity of the situation, so Jesus makes it clear in verse 14:

***John 11:14** Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. **15** For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."*

I've got to admit these verses make me uncomfortable. Even knowing how the story turns out, they still don't sit well with me. Jesus says for the disciples' sake he's glad he wasn't there, so that they may believe. That seems like a steep price to pay for belief. But then again this is Jesus, who was himself willing to die so the world might believe. Even so, it's still hard to get over the fact that Jesus sat for two days *doing nothing* while Mary and Martha watched their brother die. Or did he?

NT Wright suggests that Jesus wasn't doing nothing. Jesus was praying, as Jesus always is.<sup>1</sup> Praying for God's will for what to do next. Remember that at the end of John chapter 10 the religious leaders chased Jesus out of Jerusalem while trying to stone him to death for blasphemy. Lazarus lives in Bethany, just two miles from Jerusalem. Would it really be wise to go back there so soon? Perhaps Jesus was praying about that. Or maybe Jesus was praying for Lazarus and his family even as Lazarus was slipping away into the sleep of death. Along with those prayers maybe Jesus was praying for the miraculous sign God would ultimately provide. Could it be that when we pray for God to *do something*, the silence we hear back is actually the sound of God's prayers?

After waiting two days, Jesus finally goes to Bethany. Let's keep reading.

***John 11:17** When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. **18** Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away,*

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<sup>1</sup> NT Wright, *John for Everyone (Part 2)*, p 3.

*19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.*

*21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*

*22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."*

*23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."*

*25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,*

*26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

*27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

Before we get to Martha's faith-filled confession, let's back up for just a moment. First of all, when Jesus arrives on the scene Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days. That's a long time! According to Jewish thought at that time, the soul left the body after three days.<sup>2</sup> Four days is also long enough for a body to have started physically decomposing. Lazarus was dead, y'all. Really, really dead!

Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." If only. Two words that dare to imagine an alternate reality. How many times have you uttered those words, wishing your present circumstances to be somehow different? If only... If only I had... If only I hadn't... If only that person or those people had or hadn't... If only God had...

That's what Martha says. If only Jesus had been there, her brother wouldn't have died. She's clearly upset – *Where were you, Jesus? Why weren't you here when I needed you most?* Yet those grief-filled questions also reveal a great deal of faith. *You could have prevented this! You could have made things right. You could have saved my brother.* Martha's comments show it's possible to be both frustrated with God and full of faith at the same time.<sup>3</sup>

Even in the midst of a hopeless situation, after four days in the grave, Martha still leans in to her faith. She says, "But even now, I know God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus responds with what initially sounds like something we well-meaning Christians say to people at funerals – "Your brother will rise again." And Martha seems to receive it in that spirit. *I know, I pay attention in church. He'll rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Thanks, Jesus.*

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline M. Lewis, *John (Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries)*, p 156.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, p 157.

But then Jesus says something that changes everything! He expands Martha's understanding of resurrection. Jesus says, "I AM the resurrection and the life." (REPEAT) This is the moment John's gospel has been building to from the beginning. It's the part where, if this were a movie, you'd cue the bright lights, the extreme close-up, the beautiful, swelling music with the French horns. *I AM the resurrection and the life!*

Jesus tells Martha to forget that Sunday school answer about resurrection one day. Yes, that's important and that will happen eventually. But today is the day you're hurting. Today is the day you're grieving your brother's death. Today is the day you're stuck in darkness. Today is the day you need a miracle. And HERE. I. AM.

I AM resurrection. NOW.

I AM life. Today, in the flesh.

Not some glad morning down the road but right here, right now!

Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

Then just when Jesus has her full attention, he challenges Martha to lean in even further into her faith. He asks, "Do you believe this?" And she responds with a beautiful profession reminiscent of what John the Baptist proclaimed in the beginning of the gospel. She says, "**Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.**" (John 11:27)

Did you notice the present tense there? Coming into the world. Active. Present. Doing something. Right now. That's what Jesus' faith looks like – living and active. Life so in tune with God's will that he can't help but be resurrection. That's what Jesus asks us to believe – that even in the midst of impossible hopelessness, darkness, even death – Jesus asks us to believe that he is the resurrection and the life. And it's at this point, whether you've heard this story before or not, you know how it's going to end for Lazarus. But like all good story-tellers, John makes us wait for it.

Next Jesus meets Mary, who says the same thing her sister did – Jesus, if only you'd been here... Then Jesus sees Mary and the others weeping, and he also begins to cry. What a profound moment! Jesus, in his humanity, weeping over his dear friend's grave. And Jesus, in his divinity, weeping as he comes face to face with a tomb like the one he knew he'd soon occupy.<sup>4</sup> That one passage, shortest in the bible, is worthy of its own sermon. But we have to move on.

**John 11:38** Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. **39** Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, p 158.

days." **40** Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

**41** So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

**43** When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

**44** The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

**45** Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

**46** But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done.

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Jesus demonstrated, as he had already proclaimed: **"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?" (John 11:25-26)**

Friends, do you believe this?

Like many of you, I've been following intensely this week the story of the boys soccer team in Thailand, trapped in the cave. If you haven't heard, about two weeks ago 12 young boys and their soccer coach went for a hike in a cave. While they were inside, monsoon rains came down and flooded the entrance to the cave, trapping them two miles inside the mountain and a mile below the surface. They went nine days without food and water until some professional scuba divers were able to locate them and begin bringing them supplies. Since then one diver has died trying to resupply them with oxygen, which is getting dangerously low. Weather forecasts are calling for heavy rain, which will only make matters worse.

So last night around 11pm our time the rescue divers went back in to start evacuating the boys. Many of the children can't swim but have been receiving scuba diving lessons these last few days. It takes about 6 hours to get from the cave entrance to where the boys are trapped, and I'm sure at least that long for the divers to guide the boys back out with them. I assume we'll know some time this afternoon if they were successful. It's an absolutely gut-wrenching story. And except for the boys in the cave and their rescuers, there's nothing left for anyone to do except wait. And pray.

I decided to close with this story because I just couldn't get it out of my mind this week. And I don't intend to be disrespectful to the reality of the horror those parents are going through right now. But I couldn't help but feel how deeply this story connects with the story of Lazarus. All

Mary and Martha could do was wait on Jesus and believe that somehow he would make things right.

In the end, maybe that's what following Jesus looks like. Being willing to wait on God, not knowing what the outcome will be. Being able to surrender our "if only's" and instead to hold on only through Jesus, to accept the way things are, dark as they may sometimes be. Knowing that things might get worse before they get better. Or knowing they might not get better in this life time at all. Knowing that our circumstances, like Lazarus, just might lead to death. But believing that God works, even through death to bring new life. Trusting that Jesus is resurrection and life, both now and forever more. And in some way, maybe right now, or maybe in some hour only God knows, Jesus will call us out of every last corner of darkness, every last cave entrapment, even every last dusty tomb, into glorious and abundant life.

If only we believe.

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.