

I Am the Resurrection and the Life

John 11:1-44

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on April 12, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ I want to wish you all a happy Easter. But it feels somewhat odd to wish you happiness, considering the circumstances. Where are we going to find happiness in a time like this. **It seems improbable to find any joy in the midst of all this sadness – about as improbable as raising a dead man back to life.** Friends, our text this morning was chosen months ago – so God’s providence in bringing these events together never ceases to amaze me.

- ❖ I was struck by something I read this past week on Palm Sunday. This article was quoting the Surgeon General, Jerome Adams, who predicted we were going to see a dramatic increase in COVID-19 related deaths this week. He said, *“This is going to be the hardest and the saddest week of most Americans’ lives. This is going to be our Pearl Harbor moment, our 9/11 moment, only it’s not going to be localized; it’s going to be happening all over the country.”*
 - And he was right. This week our nation crossed a very grave milestone – nearly 19,000 reported deaths out of over 500,000 confirmed cases. All over our country, people are grieving the loss of loved ones. Most of them dying alone. Unable to be visited by family. No one there to hold their hand as life painfully slips away. This is no doubt the hardest and saddest week of most Americans’ lives.
 - And as a church, we are grieving the death of one of our members, Jennifer Reynolds, who lost her battle to COVID-19 this week. Jennifer was no stranger to suffering. In the past few years, she endured trials and hardships that few could imagine. Now her suffering is over. She is with her Savior. But we are left on earth to grieve her death.

- ❖ **But by God’s strange yet sweet providence, this hardest, saddest week of our lives corresponds with the hardest, saddest week in the life of Jesus Christ.** God must have known that the only thing that’s going to get us through this gut-wrenching week is a timely reminder that we are not alone. That we do not suffer before an unsympathetic God – who can’t comprehend the pain and agony we’re experiencing. No, we are reminded rather that Christ has walked in our steps. He understands our pain. The road to Calvary was marked by hardship, rejection, suffering, and death.
 - **And as we’ll see in today’s passage, that his road also included witnessing a loved one get sick and eventually die of that illness.** Jesus experienced the grief of bereavement. He knows what countless families are going through. That’s the timely reminder. That’s the sweet providence of these strange days.

- ❖ What I’d like to do this morning is to walk through John 11:1-44. We’re going to walk through the storyline of this particular episode in Jesus’ life. And as we’re going through it, I’d like to draw out four lessons.
 - We’ll start in vv1-16 where Jesus is talking to his disciples. Our next section will be vv17-27 where Jesus converses with Martha. And then our third section is vv28-37 where he addresses her sister Mary. And finally in our fourth section in vv38-44, Jesus turns his attention to their brother Lazarus.

Lesson One: Jesus and the Twelve

- ❖ So let's start with vv1-16 and consider our first lesson. We can put it this way: ***Loving others doesn't always mean shielding them from suffering.*** That's one of the hardest lessons to learn, and it sounds counterintuitive. We instinctively want to protect those that we love. We want to spare them from pain and shield them from suffering. **But what we're going to see very clearly in these verses is that God can let you suffer (even when it's in his power to prevent it), and yet at the same time, he can call you beloved.**

- ❖ **Let's see how these realities come together by first introducing the characters in this story.** In v1, we're introduced to a family in the town of Bethany. There were three siblings: Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus, whom we're told is gravely ill.
 - This is their first appearance in John's Gospel. In v2, John says this is the same Mary who anointed Jesus with oil and wiped his feet with her hair. That episode doesn't actually occur in his Gospel until later in chapter 12 after these events. And for those familiar with Luke's Gospel, this is the same Martha and Mary who hosted Jesus and the Twelve for dinner in Luke 10:38-42.
 - They appear to be a **kind-hearted family** since twice they're presented as generous hosts, and they're also depicted as a **family of devoted disciples** in their own right. And this is a **family that Jesus dearly loves**. His love is communicated through his actions in this chapter, but it's also stated outright in v5, "*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*"

- ❖ But what these verses highlight is that, right now, this is a **family facing sickness and suffering**. In v3, the sisters send word to Jesus, saying, "*Lord, he whom you love is ill.*" Now back in chapter 10:40, we're told that Jesus was currently residing across the Jordan river, where John the Baptist used to baptize people. Commentators estimate that, from Bethany, it would've taken at least a day for a messenger to bring word to Jesus.
 - So when Jesus gets the message that the one whom he loves is gravely ill and when you read in v5 that Jesus loved this entire family of kind-hearted, devoted disciples – you'd expect v6 to say, "So, Jesus immediately packed up and made a straight shot for Bethany." He could've been there by the next day. But that's not what it says.

- ❖ Let's read vv5-6, "*5Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*" I love you, Lazarus. So, I'm going to stay where I'm at two days longer. I'm not going to rush over to Bethany. I'm not swooping in for the rescue. Lazarus, I'm going to let you die. I love you, Martha. I love you, Mary. So, I'm going to let you grieve and experience the pain of losing a family member. **I'm going to let you suffer – and yet still I call you beloved.**

- ❖ **Friends, if you don't have the categories in your theology to reconcile God's love for you and God's will for you to suffer, then I have no idea how you stay a Christian.** There is too much suffering in this world – too much suffering in the lives of kind-hearted, devoted disciples of Jesus – to not feel this tension.

- **What is God doing?** Why doesn't he put a stop to this pandemic? What is he waiting for? Why doesn't he stop all these people from dying? Why didn't he heal Jennifer? Why didn't he answer our prayers and come to the rescue when we so desperately needed him? **Why does God delay?** That's what people are asking.

- ❖ And v6 only adds to their confusion. Why would Jesus delay? Why wouldn't he rush to his friend's side, knowing he has the power to heal? But do you see? **The reason why this delay in v6 would confuse you – is if you're operating under the assumption that loving someone means always shielding them from suffering.** It's confusing if you believe love will always compel you to protect the ones you love from any pain.

- ❖ **But ask any experienced parent, and they'll tell you that one of the hardest lessons they had to learn was to pull back.** As their child grew older, they had to learn how to release control, to stop shielding their children, to allow them to experience some of the hardships of life. As they get older, kids need to know, from personal experience, that people can be cruel; that friends can disappoint or betray you; that your heart can be broken.
 - **Parents can love their children deeply and yet purposely let their kids experience hardship.** They can choose not to swoop in every time and shield their kids from all suffering. Because they know it will stunt their growth. **Now if that makes sense for earthly parents, how much more so for God our Heavenly Father?**

- ❖ Now if you really want to know why Jesus delayed going to Lazarus, you just have to read what he says in the text. Look at v4. When he heard Lazarus was ill, he said, *"This illness does not lead to death (meaning it won't end there). It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* And then look down in v15. He tells his disciples he's glad he wasn't there to prevent Lazarus from dying, *"so that you may believe"*.
 - In other words, Jesus' delay is not signaling an indifference or callousness towards human grief and suffering. **His delay is a delay of love.** According to Jesus, loving others means wanting more for them than simply sheltering them from suffering. **Loving other means wanting them to see the glory of God and to be strengthened in their faith (cf. 11:40, 42) – even if it's costly, even if some pain is involved.**

- ❖ Friends, I realize all of us are suffering to one degree or another. And we're confused about what God is doing in all of this. When will this pandemic be over? Why isn't it over already, especially when it's within God's power to stop it?
 - **This text is reminding us that his delay is a delay of love.** Out of his great love, he has purposes for this pandemic that probably pertain to helping a countless many to see his glory on the earth and to strengthen their faith in him. That's what he's doing in this passage. And that's likely what he's doing on our world.

Lesson Two: Jesus and Martha

- ❖ Now that goal of strengthening faith is clearly on Jesus's mind when he encounters Martha in vv17-27. Let's turn our attention there and consider our second lesson. It goes like this:
Having good theology is not the same as having saving faith. In other words, Jesus wants his disciples to not just believe in concepts like the resurrection – but to personally believe in him as the resurrection and the life.

- ❖ Look at v17. It says that when Jesus and the Twelve arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had already been dead and buried for four days. So based on the assumption that it would've taken at least a day for the message to reach Jesus and another day for him to make the trek to Bethany – then even if Jesus had not delayed and left immediately, Lazarus would've been dead for at least two days. **Lazarus most likely died on the very day a message was sent to Jesus.** There was no chance for Jesus to make it there to his bedside and heal him.
 - So the two-day delay didn't contribute to Lazarus' death. **Instead, it made sure that everyone was sure that Lazarus was truly dead.** Commentators have noted that some ancient rabbis taught that a soul hovers over a dead body for the first three days before departing once signs of decomposition set in. Now that's not biblical teaching, but it might have been a common assumption in those days. **So it could be that Jesus waited four days, so that no one would misconstrue Lazarus' resurrection as a mere resuscitation.** It had to be clear that this man was dead but now alive again.

- ❖ Now let's look at what Martha says to Jesus when she sees him. Look at v21, *“²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”* Now at first glance, that looks like a complaint. It sounds like Martha's saying if you had only been here, my brother would still be alive. **Where were you, Lord?** That's what v21 sounds like.
 - But in v22, she still expresses faith in the Lord – that whatever he asks from God, he will receive. Now there's no reason to assume that she expects Jesus to resurrect her brother. But she still had faith.

- ❖ It's important to place those two verses together and to ask if complaining to God is compatible with having faith in God. **Well, from Martha's lips, we see that it's possible to feel both things towards God – frustration and faith – both at the same time.**
 - Have you felt like Martha? Have you ever wondered, “Where were you, Lord?” Where were you when my loved one died? Where were you when my marriage fell apart? Where were you when my parents got divorced? Where were you when the cancer diagnosis came? If only you were there. If only you had been there, Lord.

- ❖ Have you ever uttered words like that? Words like Martha's? You're in good company. Read the Psalms, and you'll see how, in the Psalms of Lament, David expresses his grief, his frustration, even his complaints to God. How long, O Lord? How long will you forget me? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Ps 13:1)

- ❖ But in his complaining, David never stops believing. That's the difference between **godly complaining and ungodly grumbling**. David complains, the prophets complain, Martha complains – they all complain to God, but they don't grumble. **Grumblers complain about God. The godly complain to God in the context of faithful prayer.**
- ❖ Now let's keep reading in v23. *“²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."”* So her theology is sound. **She holds to the orthodox, majority-Jewish view of her day that taught a future end-time resurrection of the dead, marking the end of this age.** Martha believed that on that final day, her brother will rise again – and to glory because of his faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.
 - That's good theology. But as we said, the lesson here is that having good theology is not the same as having saving faith. **There's a difference between believing in the idea of a resurrection and believing that Jesus is the resurrection.**
- ❖ That's Jesus' point in v25. Look there, *“²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"”* **Jesus is challenging Martha to move from an abstract belief in a theological concept to a personal belief in him as the very source and power of resurrection and resurrection life.**
 - Knowing that this present age will come to a cataclysmic end and result in a final resurrection is one thing. But having the confidence that you will be part of the resurrection unto eternal life is something else.
- ❖ You could say the same thing about the gospel in general. You can be taught that Jesus is Lord, that he died on a cross for sinners, that he rose again, and offers forgiveness and eternal life. You can affirm these truths. You can have good theology. That's one thing.
 - But do you believe this? **Do you believe in Jesus – as your Lord; as the one who died for your sins, who rose again for your salvation, who has forgiven you and given you eternal life?** Being able to recite the truths of the gospel is good – but not enough. Believing there will be a resurrection of the dead is good – but not enough. **You have to believe Jesus is the resurrection – only through personal faith in him will you join him in the final resurrection to enter his kingdom of glory.**
- ❖ That's an important lesson to reflect on. **Because we've entered a strange season – a time period more akin to a past century where there was no modern medicine and the mortality rate was far higher.** In generations past, every person was closely familiar with death. They would've known a sibling or some other close relative that had died.
 - **It's a sad thought, but I think we're entering a season where all of us will grow far more familiar with death than we prefer.** We won't be able to block it out. Death will come close to home. It's very likely that we're all going to know someone who will die from this disease.

- ❖ This is why we need to reflect on the words of Jesus – calling himself the resurrection and the life. **We need to reflect on whether or not we’re ready to face death – the death of someone we know or even our own.**

Lesson Three: Jesus and Mary

- ❖ I know it’s not a pleasant thought. It’s not fun to think about death. In fact, it can be really upsetting. But just know that Jesus felt the same way. Let’s look now at vv28-37 and Jesus’ encounter with Mary and other mourners at the gravesite. This is the third lesson for us to draw: ***Being upset and grieving the consequences of sin are right responses.*** In other words, you have every right to be upset at death and to grieve death and other consequences of sin.
- ❖ Look at v32. At this point, Martha calls for her sister Mary, and she goes to see Jesus. *“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.””* Now as with Martha, it wouldn’t be fair to depict Mary as grumbling. If anything, it’s another example of godly complaint. But now notice how Jesus responds in vv33, *“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.”*
 - That phrase *“deeply moved in his spirit”* is interesting. Outside of Scripture, the Greek referred to the snorting of horses. **When used to describe a human expression, it’s meant to convey anger or indignation.** That means Jesus was upset. He was upset and greatly troubled.
- ❖ But what was he upset at? **Some would say that Jesus was deeply moved and upset by all the grief and sadness around him.** The family he loved was grieving. Many people had traveled from Jerusalem (about 2 miles away) and were there to mourn. V33 says that Jesus saw Mary weeping and the other mourners weeping, and that’s when he was deeply moved in his spirit – that’s when he got upset.
 - **He was angry with the curse of sin and all its consequences.** Sin introduced into God’s good creation the evil realities of sickness and death – which has wrecked so much havoc in the world and led to so much suffering. Jesus was angry at the reality of death – at how it steals away our loved ones. It made him upset.
- ❖ **Have you ever felt that anger towards death?** If you’ve ever been to a viewing or a wake after someone dies – it’s an informal time where people can pay their respects. And sometimes there’s an open casket where you can view the body of the deceased.
 - Every time, for me, something about it feels wrong. You see that person you know laying there. And you half expect them to open their eyes and get up. The fact that there’s no response – there’s no life in them – feels wrong. This is not the way it’s supposed to be! Death is a cruel enemy. Death is upsetting, and Jesus felt the same.
 - Now keep reading to see how Jesus reacts when he sees where his friend has been laid. Look at v34, *“³⁴And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see. ³⁵Jesus wept. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!””*

- ❖ **So these same realities that made Jesus upset also made him grieve. He wept as he witnessed sickness and death.** Now the word here is different than the verb describing the weeping of Mary and the Jews back in v33. Their weeping was the typical wailing and weeping that you'd find in funeral processions. It's the same kind of bitter weeping that Peter did after he denied the Lord three times (Mt 26:75).
 - But when it says "*Jesus wept*", it simply means he shed tears. He wasn't wailing like the rest of them, thinking he won't see his friend again. He knew what he was about to do. No, what was happening was that the same consequences of sin that prompted his anger – elicited his grief.

- ❖ **What we learn here is that being upset and being sad are the right responses to sin and its consequences.** Friends, if you're feeling a mix of emotions right now – as sickness and death all around us – just know that the Lord has felt the same way.
 - That's the mystery and the beauty of the Incarnation. The immutable, impassible, infinite God of the Universe – the God who created us – became a human like us. **In the person of Jesus, God shared our emotional state.** He felt the same mix of anger and sadness that you feel right now – every time you read another headline or you hear another report of the loss of life or livelihood. **He knows how you feel.** *"¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."* (Heb 4:15-16)

Lesson Four: Jesus and Lazarus

- ❖ This is definitely a time of need. **It's a bleak time; a desperate time; and no one knows when the darkness will lift.** We're all looking for hope. We're all looking for that light at the end of the tunnel. In that article I read, the Surgeon General said, "*there is a light at the end of the tunnel if everyone does their part for the next 30 days. There is hope, but we've also got to all do our part.*"
 - Now he was referring to strict social distancing measures – that's our part. And the light at the end of the tunnel is the flattening of the curve – a downward trend in confirmed cases and deaths and the eventual lifting of these strict measures. And the even greater hope is the development of a vaccine to combat this novel coronavirus.

- ❖ As Christians, we should be hoping and praying that we reach the light at the end of this tunnel very soon. But as Christians – on a day like today of all days in the year – we should remember that our highest hope is *not* for schools to reopen; for small businesses to be up and running; for the economy to recover; for everyone to go back to our normal routines. **Our highest hope is not even for the curve to flatten or for a vaccine to be developed.**
 - **Because we know that – even if we're safe from this virus – we have yet to stave off death.** We have yet to avert the inevitable. We will all still die. If not this year; if not by a disease caused by a virus; then it will be some day down the road and by some other cause.

- ❖ I don't mean to be morbid. I mean to remind you of our highest hope. It's what Jesus demonstrates with a powerful object lesson in vv38-44. In our fourth lesson we're reminded that – ***looking to the resurrection of the dead is our highest hope.***

- ❖ Look back at v43. Jesus tells them to roll away the stone in front of Lazarus' tomb. They comply, and then he prays to the Father – asking that what he's about to do will strengthen everyone's faith. *“⁴³When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." ⁴⁴The 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."”*
 - **Some have remarked that it's a good thing Jesus said Lazarus' name** – otherwise all the tombs would've given up their dead that day and that future resurrection Martha spoke of would've come early. That's the kind of power and authority invested in the words of Christ.

- ❖ What Jesus did that day – in resurrecting Lazarus from the dead – is to give us a powerful illustration of what he would accomplish that first Easter morning. **And now that he's defeated death; now that he is risen – this passage serves as an illustration of what we who trust in Jesus will experience in the final resurrection.** When the Lord returns, in a loud voice, he'll command us to “come out”, and we will rise in glory to be with him forever.

- ❖ If you look back at v11, you'll notice how Jesus describes the death of his friend. *“He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."* There's a good reason why Christians, from the beginning, prefer to use “falling asleep” as a euphemism for death (cf. Lk 8:52; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor 15:6, 18). That's why, when believers die, it's common to say they fell asleep in Christ.
 - Because for a Christian, death is like sleep – it's temporary. **Just as sleep leads to an awakening, death leads to a resurrection.** That's why Christians no longer have to fear death. It's as scary as falling asleep. When believers close their eyes to this world, Jesus opens them again. And we find ourselves in his presence, standing in a new world, in a new creation.

- ❖ Friends, it could be that your hardest and saddest week of your life as yet to arrive. It's still down the road for you. But now you know – **that because the hardest and saddest week of any human being in all of human history has already been endured and ended with resurrection and newness of life** – now you know, where your story is going and how it will end. That's if the Risen Lord is *your* Lord and Savior.