

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Jesus Means Life**

John 11:17-37

I know it's the first Sunday after Easter, but we're not done with cemeteries. In this morning's Scripture passage from John, we're near another tomb. This one holds the body of Lazarus. He's not just dead. He's four days dead, says John. And no one is under any illusions. Family and friends are coming to terms with the reality of the situation. Mourning rituals are well underway. Folks have gathered to grieve and to comfort to one another. At least they have each other to help bear the weight of sorrow.

But the person they need the most, Jesus himself, has just now arrived, a couple of days after receiving word of Lazarus's condition. It's as if Jesus is on a different timetable, one that's geared more toward his own death. Be that as it may, Martha doesn't hesitate to let Jesus know that his pastoral care hasn't measured up to her expectations. In fact, the way Martha sees it, if Jesus had come as soon as he heard that Lazarus was sick, Lazarus wouldn't be wrapped in burial clothes and lying in a tomb right now.

And yet, Martha mixes her complaint with a good dose of confidence. Even though Jesus could have stepped it up and gotten to Bethany sooner, Martha is still fully assured that he is a righteous man, and that if he asks God to bring Lazarus back to life, God will do it.

But Jesus wants Martha to know that he's much more than just a person who lives close to God and knows how to pray. That's why Jesus' next statement opens the way to one of his most important pronouncements in John's Gospel. Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will rise again. She responds by affirming one of the basic tenets of her faith. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (v. 24). You see, Martha is a faithful Jew, and she believes in the future resurrection of the dead, when God comes to bring final judgment, and salvation for his people.

Jesus answers Martha's confession of faith with a declaration of his own. It's one of the most remarkable statements in all of Scripture. Jesus says, "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?" (vv. 25-26). It's not one of those statements with a little box beside it that you can just quickly check off and say, "Okay, I agree." Sort of like clicking the "Accept" button that confirms you have read and agree to all the terms and conditions of your new online account.

Jesus' statement is no mere theological formality that requires the hearer's hasty consent. No, Jesus' statement is an unmatched claim about who he is, why he has come, and what God is doing through him. It's one of those "I am" statements that we meet at numerous points in John's Gospel. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (6:35). "I am the light of the world" (8:12). "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14). "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6). Sometimes Jesus even makes these kinds of statements without a noun following the verb, such as when he says, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" (8:58).

These "I am" statements are Jesus' way of revealing his identity. He uses them to express his unity with the Father, to show what it means that he and God are one. And Jesus makes these statements in a variety of places, contexts, and circumstances, including periods of mourning. That's why his declaration to the grieving Martha has to do with death, and life, and resurrection. Her brother's tomb may already be sealed shut, but that doesn't mean that death is the end of Lazarus's story.

Why? Because of the power of God. In the Jewish faith, including how it's expressed in the Old Testament, the power of life and death belongs to God, and to God alone. God is the Creator. God is the source of life. And the life that God's people are promised in the end, resurrection life, comes from God. This means that when we celebrated Easter last Sunday, we weren't recalling history's greatest act of divine resuscitation. We weren't declaring that Jesus somehow had a near-death experience and then came back to tell about it. No, we were announcing resurrection. We were proclaiming an act of creation in which God took the dead Jesus and made him alive, giving him a new and transformed body, a body full of such glory and power as could only come from the maker of heaven and earth.

So when Jesus looks Martha in the eye and says, "I am the resurrection and the life," he's revealing the fact that he himself shares fully in the power of God. The power to create. The power to give life. The power to make new. God's power over life and death is shared with Jesus. The Father and the Son are one.

To meet Jesus, then, is to meet God. To see the Son is to see the Father. To hear the Messiah is to hear the one who sent the Messiah. Jesus is the will of God in human flesh. Jesus is God's way of working out his purpose for the world. And at the heart of God's purpose is love for the world, a love so powerful that it overcomes the power of death.

The final and complete defeat of death was something that God's people were expecting at the end of the story, sometime in the future, when God would come in saving judgment. But in Jesus, something surprising and remarkable has occurred. God's future for the world has shown up in the present. What was expected to happen to all God's people at the end of time has happened to this one man Jesus in the middle of time. He has been raised from the dead, which means that the final act in the great drama of redemption is now underway.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had planned his funeral, which took place in Saint Paul's Cathedral. In his service, he included many of the great hymns of the church and used a beautiful Anglican liturgy. After the benediction, a bugler, who had been positioned high in the dome of Saint Paul's, began playing "Taps," the universal signal that says the day is over. But then came a dramatic turn. As Churchill had instructed, after "Taps" was finished, another bugler, located on the other side of the great dome, played the notes of "Reveille"—It's time to get up. It's time to get up. It's time to get up in the morning." This was Churchill's testimony that at the end of history, the last note will not be "Taps"; It will be "Reveille."<sup>1</sup>

"I am the resurrection and the life," says Jesus. He's essentially telling us that in him and through him, "Reveille" has started. The life-giving power of God has come into the world, rolling the stone away from the entrance, and summoning us to come forth from our tombs. Tombs that threaten to lead us to hell and to separate us from the love of God. Tombs of guilt. Tombs of shame. Tombs of disease. Tombs of depression. Tombs of fear. Tombs of grief. Tombs of greed. Tombs of self-righteousness. Tombs of self-absorption. Tombs of violence. Tombs of hatred. Tombs of strife. Whatever the tomb that seeks to hold you,

Jesus' command is that the stone be taken away, so the glory of God can be revealed. As to Lazarus, so to you, Jesus calls, "Come out!" (11:43).

Now granted, even after Jesus raised him to life, Lazarus eventually died again. And Lazarus still waits, with all believers, for the final appearing of Jesus Christ and our complete transformation into his likeness. Jesus himself points toward this future when he says, "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (v. 25b). Here is good news that physical death has no power over a believer. A believer's future is determined by his or her faith in Jesus, not by his or her death. According to Jesus, to be alive is to be in a relationship of love with him, a relationship that death can't sever or destroy. This means living in the presence of God during life and after death. So we confidently reaffirm the reality of a believer's life beyond death, and eventually the final resurrection.

But we also reaffirm the reality of life before death. In other words, we don't have to wait until the final resurrection for the life-giving power of Jesus to be at work in us. In addition to saying, "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies," Jesus also says, "Whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (v. 26a). Jesus doesn't mean that a believer is exempt from physical death. He simply means that the eternal life he has come to bring isn't just a gift that awaits the believer way out there in the distant future. Eternal life is a kind of life, a way of being that a believer receives and experiences in the here and now. Remember again that Jesus is taking the life of the world to come and pulling it forward into the present, making this eternal life available to those who believe in him and his word.

And he himself went to the full extent of giving himself in order to make this eternal life possible. As much as we celebrate his resurrection, and anticipate our own, we don't lose sight of the cross. The Jesus who came to Lazarus's tomb was eventually laid in his own tomb. In fact, the miracle of raising Lazarus sets in motion the formal decision to kill Jesus. So it's through Jesus' suffering, execution, and entombment that we get released from our own tombs. It's through his getting wrapped in grave clothes that we get unwrapped from ours. It's through Jesus' death that we get life.

And that's what we actually, and most desperately, need. Life. Remember that the Father didn't send the Son to take bad people and make them good. He didn't send the Son to take good people and make them better. The Father sent the Son to take dead people and make them alive. And where there is aliveness in Christ there will be goodness, and grace, and love.

How near to us is this power of life that overcomes the power of death? How close is this love that conquers the grave? As close as the risen Jesus, who stands before you and me today and says, "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?"

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<sup>1</sup> *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 52.