

## **Jesus: The Resurrection and the Life** (John 11:17-27)

*Series: A Matter of Life and Death; The Importance of Faith*

Sunday, March 17, 2024

Faith Manhattan Church

This morning we will look at a passage of Scripture with one of Jesus' most powerful statements about who he is and what he offers to those who know him, trust him, and follow him.

In John 11:17-27, we find the tremendous and mysterious declaration of Christ, "***I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.***"

If you're like me, these verses stir something deep within your heart and soul. When I read *I am the resurrection and the life*, I know I am reading something powerful and holy. I know that these words are precious and I get the sense that they should have a profound effect on me.

And yet...sometimes I also get lost in the grandness and lofty theology of this statement.

- What does it mean that Jesus is the resurrection and the life?
- How can I die, but live, but then also live and never die?
- What is the hope I should draw from these verses, and how should it shape me?
- How do I live as if these words of Jesus mean something tangible and real to me?

We'll consider these questions, and a few others, as we work through this passage together today.

This will be our second Sunday in John 11. Last week Pastor Steve got us started by looking at v1-16. In that passage, Jesus received an urgent message from two sisters, Mary and Martha, telling him that their brother and Jesus' beloved friend, Lazarus, was very sick. Upon hearing this, Jesus declared that this sickness would not end in Lazarus's death, but instead be used to reveal God's glory. And then he did something strange: instead of rushing off to perform a life-saving miracle on his friend, Jesus waited for two days. He delayed. And at some point during that time, Lazarus died. This, understandably, led to a great deal of sadness and suffering for Martha and Mary, and a great deal of confusion for everyone involved. Why did Jesus decide to wait? What was going on?

This morning we'll get to peel back one more layer on what Jesus is up to with his delay, and how it connects with his bold claim that all that is happening in the story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus will ultimately bring glory to God.

### **Jesus Arrives in Bethany (v17-20)**

*17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.*

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Our passage begins with Jesus arriving in Bethany, but being far too late to save his beloved friend. Lazarus had already died (probably not long after Martha and Mary sent their messenger to Jesus), and his body had been in a tomb for four days. The Jews believed the soul of a dead person lingered near the body for three days, hoping to reenter (this is a custom/tradition, not a biblically-informed belief). By the fourth day, however, all hope of such a return was lost. The soul departed permanently, and the person was absolutely, irrevocably dead. Lazarus was truly gone.

His body would have been prepared by wrapping it in burial linens and placing it in a rock-cut tomb. Once laid to rest, his family – Martha and Mary – began a formal mourning period that lasted for seven days. During this time they would not work, or even leave the house. The “many Jews” that came from nearby Jerusalem to comfort them would also have brought food and gifts to ease their burden and grief.

The detail of Bethany’s proximity to Jerusalem – less than 2 miles – is more than just an explanation for why so many were able to come and pay their respects. It is also a foreboding reminder of the risk Jesus is taking. The last time Jesus was in Jerusalem (Chapter 10), his teachings and miracles caused such a stir that those who disagreed with him attempted to kill him. This trip to Bethany puts Jesus dangerously within striking distance of his enemies. If news of his arrival were to reach the mob in Jerusalem, they could likely rush to Bethany, stones in hand, in less time than it would take you or me to walk around Manhattan City Park twice.

In v20 we’re told, *“When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.”*

Martha’s leaving her home to go out to meet Jesus is a bit strange. As I said before, the custom was for the grieving to remain in their home for seven days. Scholars are divided on why Martha would decide to break with tradition and go outside the village to meet with Jesus. It could be a sign of respect – a good host would often meet guests of honor out on the road and accompany them to their destination. Martha could be seeking to honor Jesus, even in the midst of her own grief. Or, perhaps Martha knew how dangerous it might be for Jesus to be seen by the Jews from Jerusalem, and attempted to save him from taking that risk (to stop him from coming into town now that it was too late to do anything for Lazarus).

Whatever the reason, Martha goes out to meet and speak with Jesus while Mary remains home (probably to continue receiving the many visiting mourners). This sets the stage for a one-on-one conversation between Jesus and Martha, full of tension, emotion, and some truly stunning declarations of who Jesus really is.

### **Martha’s Grief and Faith (v21-22)**

21 “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

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There is a lot of debate over how to interpret Martha’s words in v21.

Is she rebuking or accusing Jesus?

- “You didn’t get here in time, you **SHOULD** have been here, if you’d been here you could have saved my brother!”

Or is she expressing her faith in Jesus through a lament?

- “If you’d been here, I know you could have done something, I know you would have saved him.”

I’m not sure we need to puzzle out a precise answer. As is so often the case when listening to someone who is grieving, Martha’s words are probably a mix of pain and understanding, of accusation and wishful thinking, of frustration and faith. It’s not hard to imagine Mary and Martha exchanging the brokenhearted belief, “*If only Jesus had been here, if only he’d made it in time*” with one another over the last few days. And now that Jesus is here, Martha can’t help but say what has been weighing so heavily on her heart:

*“I sent for you and hoped you would get here in time. Jesus, I really thought you would be here when I needed you. Why weren’t you here? Things would be different, and my brother would be alive, if you had just showed up.”*

I think it is powerful, and important to acknowledge, that this sort of language toward the Son of God is found in the pages of our Bibles. I am sure that many of us have felt this same sort of pain, and frustration with Jesus, in relation to our own losses. We prayed, but our loved one still died. We asked for a miracle, but instead we experienced difficulties, trials, and defeat. We look for Jesus and cry out for his help, but struggle with feeling hopeless and alone.

Too often Christians think this sort of honest heartache and raw lament is a sign of spiritual immaturity or a lack of faith. But this passage illustrates a truth we can find throughout all of Scripture: ***it is okay to bring your grief before God***. You can be emotional, illogical, confused, frustrated, hurt, sad, and utterly broken, and **still receive compassion, empathy, and love from the Lord**.

We’ll take a closer look at how Jesus responds to Martha in just a moment, but here I want to make a quick note that despite her making this blunt statement that borders on blaming Jesus for Lazarus’ death, Martha never receives a rebuke. Jesus will listen to her, and he will reply, and he will call her to a deeper faith, but ***he does not say or do anything to make her feel worse in her time of grieving***. He doesn’t take the statement personally. He doesn’t get offended. He leaves space for what Martha is experiencing, and ***brings grace into her grief***.

That is the kind Savior you and I have in Jesus Christ. That is the depth of honesty we can have before him, trusting that our vulnerability will be met with understanding. And ultimately, these are the hallmarks of Jesus’ character (compassion, patience, empathy, etc) that we are called to imitate in our own lives.

The deep grief of Martha’s words, “*If you had been here, my brother would not have died*”, is followed up by an expression of her continued confidence in Jesus. Her brother is dead, her heart is broken, Jesus was too late to help, and YET she goes on to say:

*22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”*

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Martha's faith is not lost. She believes something can still happen. She knows that Jesus has an intimacy with God unlike anything that has ever been seen before. And so she casts her worries at the feet of Jesus, hangs all her hope on him, and trusts him for whatever comes next.

It's hard to say for sure what Martha was hoping for in v22. Later, in v39, she'll warn Jesus not to open Lazarus' tomb, because four days into the burial, decomposition will have begun. This seems to indicate she was not thinking Jesus would bring her brother back to life (otherwise she would not have protested the opening of his tomb). So, what does she mean when she says, "*I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.*"

I think this is a beautiful example of what happens when grief and faith collide. Martha does not know what to ask for. ***But she knows who to go to.*** Martha does not know what, if anything, can be done to make her world right again. ***But she knows who to draw near to,*** and who to trust in this moment of hopelessness. When all seems lost, when she's overwhelmed with burdens, when everything has gone wrong, ***Martha turns toward Jesus.***

It seems like such a simple, children's-church answer, but simple solutions are often the most powerful: **Turn towards Jesus.** Trust him with your grief. Trust him with your hope. Trust him to know what to do, and to know what you need, especially when you don't know the answers to those things yourself.

If you're in the midst of a struggle, and you're working through the battle between your faith and your grief, then I hope and pray this reminder brings hope to you: **Turn Toward Jesus.** He is worth trusting with your faith, even if that faith is tinged (or overwhelmed) with doubt and pain. We'll see exactly why this is true in just a moment.

Their conversation continues with Jesus' first response to Martha's hurt and heartache:

23 Jesus said to her, "*Your brother will rise again.*"

24 Martha answered, "*I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*"

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Martha understands Jesus' words "*Your brother will rise again*" as an attempt to comfort her with the reminder that Lazarus will be raised to life in the resurrection on the Day of Judgement (which was a somewhat common belief among some Jews at this time in history). You can almost hear her take a deep breath and give a resigned sigh as she accepts this promise. The resurrection is a good thing. The eternal life and healed, healthy, strong physical bodies that will be given to us in those last days is worth waiting for, and is indeed meant to be an encouragement during our difficult times in this world.

But it's not what Jesus is talking about at this particular moment. Martha is thinking about what will happen. Jesus has something far more immediate in mind. Martha is expressing what would have been a very good, theologically sound, and religiously acceptable resolution to her grief: my brother is now dead, but one day I will see him again.

Jesus is about to redefine all of those things by declaring something truly unexpected, unprecedented, and wondrous.

## Jesus: The Resurrection and The Life (v25-26)

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

John 11

Jesus is the resurrection.

Jesus is the life.

Jesus is the one who breaks the power of death.

Jesus is the one we must believe.

Martha thought Jesus' promise that Lazarus would rise again was calling her to put her faith in a day and a place and an event, sometime in the unknowable future. It's an easy mistake to make. We do it all the time. We reduce Christianity to little more than a survival plan and make it a strategy for getting what we want – an eternal life, a heavenly existence, a warm and fuzzy forever with our family and friends by our sides.

But Jesus does not say, "I will give you the resurrection."

Jesus does not promise the provision of a good life after this one is all used up and done.

Jesus calls us to **himself**.

***I am the resurrection. I am the life.***

Jesus is the point. Jesus is the focus, and He Himself is the prize.

I think two very important points can be drawn out from these verses and this recognition of their total focus on the person, Jesus.

First: ***Jesus is the power behind the promise of our physical resurrection.*** The resurrection is not a gift waiting for us at the end of this age. The resurrection is an aspect and expression of what it means to be in fellowship with Christ. The resurrection is not about getting something good. It's about being with the One who is good. So good, that in his presence there is fullness of joy, restoration of weariness, and yes...a resurrected body perfectly prepared for an eternity with our creator. We will experience death. Our bodies will perish. But that death will not last, and our bodies will live again through the power of our Savior. If you know Jesus, and believe in Jesus, then you will live after death, once again, in a body, for all eternity. This is the promise of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

But that is not the only promise.

Jesus is also ***our source of life and our soul's safe keeping.***

***"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."***

Our lives are changed, here and now, because of what we know to be true about Jesus.

Our lives are changed, here and now, because of our daily fellowship with Jesus.

Our lives are changed, here and now, because we live through our belief in him.

- Our purpose becomes defined by Jesus.
- Our character changes to be more like Jesus.
- Our actions imitate those of Jesus.

And ultimately our lives are changed, beyond the here and now, because in Christ death has been defeated. When Jesus says, “*whoever lives by believing in me will never die*”, he means that those who believe in him are united to him, and he has already conquered death. Jesus is alive. And so are those who trust him, forever. We will experience death, but it will be a shadow, an echo, an ultimately powerless version of what it once was.

Jesus declares himself the resurrection and the life. He lays this claim before us all, and then, just as he asked Martha, he asks us too: ***Do you believe this?***

And my hope for you, for me, for our loved ones, for our neighbors, for every believer gathered here this morning, and for every one who does not yet believe but feels something stirring inside them, calling to them – my hope is that we would share in Martha’s beautiful, powerful, faithful confession:

**Martha’s Reply, Our Response: “Do you believe this?” (v27)**

27 “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

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Martha turned toward Jesus. She recognized him as the power behind the promise of the resurrection. And she confessed him as the source of her life. In his presence she knew she was safe – eternally saved and safe thanks to being in fellowship with Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the World.

Do we believe the same? Do you believe this?

If you do, will you recommit to that confession today, right here and now?

And if you do not...then I ask you to consider, perhaps really and truly for the first time: who do you think Jesus is? What do you think of his claim to be the resurrection and the life? If you were to believe all this was true, what might change about your life? If you want to explore these questions, then please let us do that with you. Because we believe this is a matter of true life, and true death. We believe we all need Jesus. We want you to see that need, and believe in Him, too.

Our faith in Christ is not about what we can get, or how we should act, or even what Jesus can do for us. Our faith in Christ is about Jesus himself. It is about believing in him, drawing near to him, and trusting him to be the Messiah, the Son of God, our Savior.