

Introduction:

- A. If Jesus’ disciples had understood what was actually happening they might well have thought him cruel. They were about 60 miles north of Bethany when word came to them that Jesus’ beloved friend, Lazarus, was deadly ill. He wasn’t expected to live. And he didn’t. Jesus knew he wouldn’t recover. The thing is, he didn’t do anything about it. Well, that’s not entirely accurate either. What he did was he waited... two more days. And by the time they got to Bethany, just two miles east of Jerusalem, Lazarus was dead and buried. Four days earlier.

Lazarus had two sisters: Martha and Mary. Jesus loved them all. He’d been in their home a number of times. They were true believers in Jesus. But Jesus didn’t get there in time. On purpose. **Turn to John 11.** Jesus finally made it clear to his disciples what was going on: *“Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”* It is kind of a strange way to put it, *“Let us go to him.”* **Jesus was staging a sign.** He was arranging a demonstration intended to give anyone with an open heart the best of reasons to believe in him.

- B. When Martha heard Jesus was near town she went out to meet him. **V.21-27...** Martha believed all the right things: That God always answered all Jesus’ prayers, that Lazarus would be raised on the last day, and that Jesus is *“the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”* What Jesus did for her was to connect the dots. Only a few days before Jesus himself would die he proved that God had given him absolute authority over death and life.

I. TO BELIEVE IN JESUS IS TO BELIEVE THAT HE IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

Look more closely at **vv.25-26:** *Jesus said to her, “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. Do you believe this?”*

- A. In these words Jesus speaks of living and dying in two senses. First, when Jesus said, “I am the resurrection” he explained what he meant by that in the first statement: “The one who believe in me will live, even though they die.” Yes, Martha, there is a resurrection in the last day and God’s people will be raised on that day. But here’s the thing: **those who are raised on the last day are those—and only those—who have believed in Jesus.** The Bible says that *all* people will be raised to face judgment, but only *some* people will be raised to eternal life. Only *some* people will actually *live*, and those are only the people who believe in Jesus. In **John 6:40** Jesus said, “*For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.*”
- B. When Jesus said, “I am... the life” he explained in the second statement, “whoever lives by believing in me will never die.” That says that those who believe in Jesus start living a new life in that moment and it never stops. *That* life never ends. **There is no death that can stop the life Jesus gives us.** Jesus says that when someone puts their faith in him they are *born again*. Their everlasting life starts right there. The day before you were a mortal. The day after you are an *immortal*. “*Whoever lives by believing in me will never die.*” Jesus said in **John 8:51**, “*Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will never see death.*”
- Oh, you may hear a terminal diagnosis, but you will never see death. You may come to your last hour on earth, but you will never see death. You may see your loved ones gathered around your bed, but you will never see death. You might plan your funeral or pick out your cemetery plot, write your will and leave lists for your kids, but you will never see death. You might be ordered into battle, or be caught up in the diabolical plan of a terrorist or criminal but you will never see death. Not if you believe in Jesus. **Oh no, whoever believes in Jesus will never see death.**
- C. Be sure you are clear on this, too. There is no other heaven to go to but God’s heaven. There is no other resurrection

but the one Jesus gives. There isn't an everlasting life option for those who reject Christ—some other community in eternity. The Bible says, "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*" [Acts 4:12] **Calvin Miller** wrote that for Christians...

*"Dying is but getting dressed for God,
Our graves are merely doorways cut in sod."*

Martha went back to Mary and told her, "*The Teacher is here and he is asking for you.*" Mary went out and told Jesus the very same thing her sister had—something they had said over and over to one another, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" Nothing is more common after death than loved ones saying, "*If only...*"

All around Mary and Martha were mourners. They were evidently a prominent family because many had made the 2-mile trek from Jerusalem to mourn with them, to say nothing of the custom of having professional mourners.

Look at **v.33**, "*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*" It actually might be a better translation to say, "*he was **outraged in spirit and troubled***" [Carson]. Outraged! Death angered Jesus. He wasn't outraged with Mary and the other mourners. Nothing would have been more out of character for the compassionate Christ. **He was outraged at death.** Even when he *knew* he was soon to raise Lazarus back to life.

Read on in **vv.34-35**, "*Where have you laid him?*" he asked. "*Come and see, Lord,*" they replied. **Jesus wept.** Then the Jews said, "*See how he loved him!*" But some of them said, "*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?*" That's what Martha and Mary wondered too. And, of course, he could have, but Jesus wasn't weeping because he'd lost Lazarus. **He wept, I think, because death is not the way it is supposed to be and because death hurts the living so badly.** The word here suggests that perhaps Jesus' eyes welled with tears and he choked up. You've had that happen at funerals where you teared up seeing your friends' sorrow. So it was with Jesus. *Jesus wept.*

Then it happened again: **v.38**, “*Jesus, once more deeply moved, [outraged, again] came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.*”

II. EVEN THOUGH RESURRECTION IS CERTAIN, DEATH ANGERS AND GRIEVES OUR LORD OF LIFE

- A. It seems to us as though Jesus should be barely containing his excitement, hiding a smile, knowing that he is about to raise Lazarus back to life; knowing that in only a few moments all these mourners will be gasping for joy, bright-eyed with relief. **But it isn't the outcome that disturbs Jesus it is the effect.** Death and mourning and crying and pain grieve God. **Ps. 116** says, “*Precious—costly—in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants.*”
- B. When it comes to our suffering and grief, Christ does not look on impassively, knowing that in time our sadness will be turned to joy. Jesus grieves when we grieve. His heart is touched by our sorrow. Jesus is our companion, crying with us, angry with us at death. Yes, “we *will* understand it better bye and bye.” Yes, “it will be worth it all when we see Jesus.” Yes, God “*will bring you home.*” But *now* he grieves with us.
- C. God sent Jesus to die for us and to rise again so that he might conquer death once and for all. Christians learn to taunt what once we feared:

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O Death, is your sting?”

When **Rev. 21** describes heaven it says, “*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*”

We do our best to make cemeteries beautiful. But they're really horrid places, hiding what we all know is there. Death and decomposition. **V.39-40...** Death always wins. So people do their best we keep their distance. **But not Jesus.** What happened next is the culmination of the drama Jesus has staged—the reason he waited till after Lazarus died to come to his aid. **VV.41-44...**

III. JESUS TURNS DEATH'S DISHONOR TO HIS GLORY

- A. This story was a kind of living parable, a reenactment of a day yet to come. As spectacular as this was, it is like theater stagecraft compared to the real thing that happened on Easter morning.
- B. Everything in this story turns on Jesus' prayer. Martha had rightly said that God gives Jesus whatever he asks for. Jesus had actually done his praying alone with God but here he prays, as he says, "*for the benefit of the people standing here.*" Jesus wanted it to be crystal clear that God the Father honors and grants the prayers of Jesus the Messiah.
- C. Jesus issues three quick commands that no one else—no one on earth ever—could issue with authority:

"Take away the stone."

"Lazarus, come out!"

And *"Take off the grave clothes and let him go."*

I wonder what it was like to hear those commands! To be standing right there!

But just wait! One day soon *"the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."* What will the *loud command* be? I think it will be *"Come out!"* People have long observed that in this story, if Jesus hadn't named Lazarus when he issued his command, all the dead might have in that very moment left their graves.

- D. Why did Jesus stage this sign, this overwhelming conclusive evidence of his authority and of God's favor? So that we might believe him. Remember what he asked Martha, *"Do you believe this?"* That is the question. Do you believe this? Jesus said, *"The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

To believe in Jesus is a decision. *I choose to rest my life in Jesus. I choose to follow him because he gives life and*

no one else can. I invite you to choose life in Christ this morning.

In a moment you'll hear the stories of four people who have done that—two little children, and two adults. Each time a person rests their faith in Jesus it is like their own personal Easter. It is as if they are having their own Lazarus moment. Their baptisms are these short one-act plays. You will hear how they came to Christ. Then they will go under the water, because they died with Christ and were buried with him. And then, they will re-enact their own resurrection, coming up from the water just as Jesus came up from the grave.

Illus.: Shortly after I came to VCL a student told me about a play written by the great American playwright, **Eugene O'Neill** called *Lazarus Laughed*. It is about Lazarus's life after Jesus raised him from the dead and how the Roman Ceasar's threat to kill him had no effect on him. Near the beginning of the play, guests from Bethany are gathering for a banquet in Lazarus's honor. They are all desperate to hear what Lazarus has to say about his experience. One guest, seeing Lazarus there, says, "*The whole look of his face has changed. He is like a stranger from a far land. There is no longer any sorrow in his eyes. They must have forgotten sorrow in the grave.*"

Another guest, one who had helped roll the tombstone aside, recalls the scene after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead: "*And then Lazarus knelt and kissed Jesus' feet and both of them smiled and Jesus blessed him and called him 'My Brother' and went away; and Lazarus, looking after Him, began to laugh softly like a man in love with God. Such a laugh I never heard! It made my ears drunk! It was like wine! And though I was half-dead with fright I found myself laughing, too.*" [Act 1, Scene 1]