

New life from death

26 March 2023

BIBLE READING

Psalm 16:1, 7-11 (responsively)

Keep me safe, my God,
for in you I take refuge. ...

I will praise the Lord, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.

I keep my eyes always on the Lord.

With him at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,

**because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
nor will you let your faithful one see decay.**

You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

John chapter 11

Narrator Now a man named Lazarus was ill. He was from Bethany, a village just three kilometres from Jerusalem. He was the brother of Mary and her sister Martha. When Jesus heard the news he was in the region beyond the Jordan River. ...

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been dead for four days. With Bethany being so close to Jerusalem, many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

Martha Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.

Jesus Your brother will rise again.

Martha I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

Jesus 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?

Martha

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

Narrator

After she had said this, Martha went back and called her sister Mary.

Martha

The Teacher is here, and is asking for you.

Narrator

When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said ...

Mary

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Narrator

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

Jesus

Where have you laid him?

Narrator

They replied 'Come and see.' Jesus wept.
Some of the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'
But others said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'
Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

Jesus

Take away the stone.

Martha

But, Lord, by this time there is a bad smell, for he has been there four days.

Jesus

Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?'

Narrator

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said ...

Jesus

Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

Narrator

Then Jesus called in a loud voice ...

Jesus

Lazarus, come out!

Narrator

The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face. Jesus said ...

Jesus

Take off the grave clothes and let him go.

Narrator

Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary had seen what Jesus did, and believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told

them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

Jewish leaders What are we accomplishing? Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.

Narrator Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was High Priest that year, spoke up ...

Caiaphas You know nothing at all! Don't you realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish?

Narrator He did not say this on his own, but as High Priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

MESSAGE

I wonder how many of you have had the privilege of sitting with a dying person or sharing time with family members immediately following the death of a loved one. Usually few words are spoken, but it is often a special and even sacred moment. In such times, there may be a sense of deep peace or a tearful 'letting go' or perhaps relief that someone's suffering has ended. Other times there can be a quiet rage – directed towards God – about the unfairness of a life ending too soon or in tragic circumstances.



Death has a way of stripping away our masks and trivial concerns. A precious person's life journey has ended, and those remaining must begin a new chapter without the ongoing presence of the one who's died.

One of the obvious things about death in our culture is that we're not good at **talking** about it and we rarely **observe** it firsthand.



Some cultures seem to handle death and mourning much better – there is a powerful Jewish mourning ritual called **keriah** where family members literally tear their clothing as a sign of the tearing of relationship when a person dies.

Back in Jesus' day, death was an ever-present threat that was only a sickness or bad growing season away from reality. Death affected whole communities. One of the main features of Jesus' ministry and notoriety is that he **healed** people – physically and spiritually – and restored them to life in community.



So when Lazarus falls ill, it's natural for his sisters, Mary and Martha to send urgent word to Jesus to come and heal Lazarus.

In the plot of John's Gospel, opposition to Jesus' ministry is growing and the disciples speak openly about the possibility that they might all die in Jerusalem. The incident with Lazarus is presented as the last and greatest 'sign' that Jesus performs in his public ministry. It is also the last straw for his opponents – who now actively plot to arrest and kill Jesus. So for John, the raising of Lazarus is the direct catalyst of the climactic events of Easter.

Commentators are divided whether this incident is based on historical events or is some kind of parable – a vivid illustration of what Jesus does for all who believe. Either way, it is consistent with John's overall message and emphasis that Jesus gives life – even to the dead.

In John's dramatic presentation of the story, there are three separate scenes that happen at Bethany.

In the first scene, Jesus meets **Martha** and **recriminations** flow freely.

'If only you'd been here, my brother would not have died'.

If only you'd responded quicker ...

If only ... I wonder if you live with similar regrets?

But Jesus refocuses the conversation from



recrimination to hope:

'Your brother will rise again'.

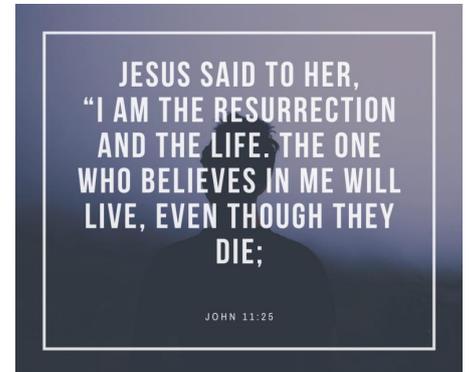
Yes, Jesus, responds Martha ... I know my theology about the resurrection of the dead ... and what will happen on the last day.

Then comes an amazing theological statement that focuses all our attention on the person of Jesus and his mission:

'I am the resurrection and the life'

This claim is then unpacked a little – first the **resurrection** – those who believe in me – even though they die – like Lazarus – will live.

Then on **life** – everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.



The astounding claim being made is that Jesus holds the keys to life and death. He is the bearer of **resurrection life**.

And the gift of **eternal life** that he offers carries on **beyond** death.

The good news that we're encouraged to get our minds around is the truth that **death** is not the ultimate reality, but rather **life** is the ultimate reality – abundant and permanent life lived in union with God.

A brief reflection from Martha ...

I'm Martha, the practical one,
the one who, along with Mary, brought up my brother
and nursed him through his last illness.

Being the practical one, I organised his burial.

When Jesus eventually arrived,
he talked with me about life and about resurrection ...
deep words that I struggled to fully get my head around.

Jesus is my friend – and he's practical too.

But sometimes Jesus is just a bit scary.

I wonder what's going to happen next ...



In the second scene, Jesus meets Mary, the more contemplative sister, the one who sits at Jesus' feet in Luke's Gospel. Here Jesus encounters **raw emotion**. Her opening words are exactly the same as Martha's – 'if only you'd been here' – but they are accompanied by an outpouring of grief and emotion.



- Mary weeps
- Other mourners weep
- Jesus too, it seems, is deeply moved and weeps also

While the conversation with Martha engages the **head**, this scene engages the **heart** and the sense of overwhelming grief and loss that death brings. Friendship, family and love torn apart ... the **fragility** of human life ... the draining away of hope ... Jesus experienced all this raw and earthy emotion – and he wept at the pain of it all. He knows what it's like to lose someone close to you.

But perhaps Jesus is also disturbed for another reason ... beyond the immediate pain of Lazarus' death. If he acts to restore Lazarus to life, what will that mean for his own future?

Compassionate action will most likely hasten his own death.

A brief reflection from Mary ...

I'm Mary, the younger sister.

My brother's dead.

I can't stop crying.

My eyes are red from crying.



When Lazarus got sick, we tried to get Jesus to come – we sent him an urgent message.

I know he loved Lazarus and could have healed him.

Jesus is our friend.

He loves us.

Why wasn't he here when we needed him the most?

Life will never be the same again.

I feel exhausted.

I wonder what's going to happen next ...

In the third scene, Jesus goes to the tomb where he is again greatly disturbed. Then comes the moment when God's glory and power are revealed: Jesus prays, speaks a command and Lazarus emerges – alive again!

Jesus calls people to new life.

I wonder if there is a part of your life that has died that Jesus could speak into to bring fresh life ...

But as always in John's Gospel, to only see the miracle of resuscitation or revival is to miss the deeper sign. The raising of Lazarus points to the spiritual insight that Jesus has come to bring **life** to all – **eternal life**, **resurrection life**, life lived in union with God, life marked by joy and peace.

It's available now and it's **secure** – not even death can interrupt this abundant 'life'.



A brief reflection from Lazarus ...

I'm Lazarus.

They tell me that I was dead.

I remember being very sick ...

and then waking up because someone was calling my name ... Lazarus!

When I tried to get up there were strips of cloth all round me.

I was scared.

I tried to move towards the light.

Someone said 'Untie him'.

The first person I saw was Jesus, my friend and he was smiling.

When I walk down the street now, people stare and whisper things.

They seem afraid to talk to me.

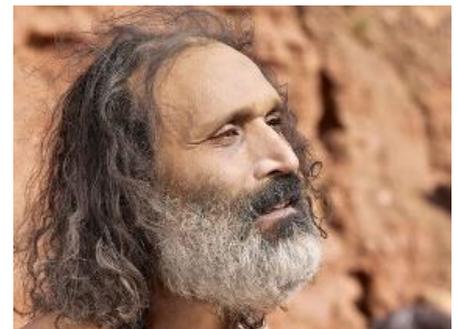
And I worry about Jesus.

He took an enormous risk.

Some people are amazed by what he did.

But others are angry.

I wonder what's going to happen next ...



This story about Lazarus is about **death** – and sickness – and grief – and all the negative experiences of being human in a broken world, experiences that sometimes make us question the love, goodness and power of God.

But at its heart this story is mostly about **life**. And for those with eyes to see and faith to believe, the **life** Jesus offers to us will win out – even over death.

This story underlines that the whole of Jesus' ministry and mission are about **giving life** – **eternal** life, **abundant** life, **resurrection** life.

It is of course also a **foreshadowing** of the story of Jesus' own death and resurrection that we remember and celebrate at Easter, where once again, life will prove to be stronger than death, light stronger than darkness and love stronger than hate.

Amen.