

I AM: The Resurrection and the Life

John 11:17-44

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[Pray]

When it comes to escape artists, Harry Houdini was a man of legend. People did all kinds of things to incarcerate him. They riveted him into a boiler –Houdini escaped. They sowed him into a canvas bag covered in chains – Houdini escaped. They locked him in an oversized milk can filled with water; they sealed him in an empty beer keg and eventually put him in a maximum-security prison. And somehow every time Houdini escaped.

But then in October of 1926, death laid its hands on Harry Houdini and put him in the grave. Before he died he told his wife “if there is any way out I will find it. I’ll make contact with you, and I’ll do it on the anniversary of my death.

For 10 years his beloved wife and biggest believer kept a light burning over his picture in anticipation of his return, but in the end she lost hope. Death held its grasp and even Houdini could not escape.

On Good Friday death laid its hands on our Lord as well. Death put Jesus in a rock-hewn tomb wrapped in grave cloth from head to toe. In front of the tomb was a rock with the seal of the Roman crown. And in front of that rock was a guard of professional soldiers with the command to keep that tomb sealed at pains of death.

But on the morning of the third day. On Easter morning 2000 years ago Jesus left death behind. He unraveled the grave clothes that bound Him like a butterfly forsaking a cocoon. He rose up through the rock cavern and passed by the irrelevant guard. By the very breath of God Jesus not only returned to life, but came into the fullness of life in a way none of us have experienced – yet.

But one day we will. Jesus’ defeat of death brought with it a promise: that life in abundance and of an unending variety can be ours. It won’t be attained by tricking death with some slight of hand, but by placing our trust in the One named I AM, The Resurrection and the Life.¹

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Today is our third week in our I AM series. Today we are going to be looking at the story of Lazarus in John chapter 11 which is very much an Easter Story. In fact when it comes to resurrections, which is what Easter is about, the story of Lazarus was designed by Jesus to be a prequel to prepare us for His own death and resurrection.

¹ Illustration adapted from Adrian Roger’s sermon “If there had been no resurrection” <http://www.sermonsearch.com/content.aspx?id=14782> accessed March 27th, 2013.

And so, as our context today and as a defense for why I can preach John 11 on Easter Sunday here are five similarities between the stories:

First Lazarus lived and died and lived again in Bethany just 2 miles from Jerusalem where only a little more than a week later Jesus would go to the cross.

Second, Lazarus' death, like His own, was one Jesus could have stopped. After Jesus heard Lazarus was sick He intentionally waited two days before setting out to heal him and then took His time as He traveled – Lazarus' death and resurrection was Jesus' plan.

Likewise Jesus death and resurrection was His plan. Jesus declared:

I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. (John 10:17-18)

Next Lazarus was buried in the same way Jesus would be – wrapped in cloth and laid in a cave like tomb. While fairly common, this wasn't the way everyone was buried in the first century.

Fourth, the very next story in the book of John has Jesus returning to the resurrected Lazarus' house and Mary anointing Jesus' feet with perfume – something done to prepare dead bodies for the tomb – Only a week earlier she would have been doing the same thing for Lazarus.

And ultimately both Lazarus' and Jesus' deaths and resurrections brought glory to Jesus and the Father. In verse four, speaking about Lazarus Jesus said:

“This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.” (John 11:4)

So, when it comes to death and resurrection, Jesus sets up Lazarus to be the prequel for Himself and the promise that what He has said about Himself for us is true. Jesus said:

This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:40)

That's the promise, that we have a resurrection to look forward to. And the evidence Jesus gave that His words are true was His own resurrection. And that's what Easter is about. Easter is the evidence that in spite of the pain we find ourselves living in Jesus loves us, Jesus promises our resurrection and Jesus has the power to accomplish it.

So come with me now into the story of Lazarus. Let's start by looking at verse 17

[Read John 11:17-19]

As the story picks up, Jesus is just arriving in Bethany, the home town of Mary, Martha and Lazarus – a family John tells us held a special place in Jesus' heart:
 Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. (John 11:5)

And yet He is four days late to Lazarus' funeral! Had Jesus really wanted to hurry he could have made it to Bethany in one day of hard walking. He was near the Jordan river 25km away when He got the news. But instead the text tells us:
 So when He heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days. (John 11:6)

Imagine you had a close friend who lived in Vancouver who had just been given hours to live. You had the resources to fly down, but instead you decided to go camping for two days in Quesnel and then spend a night in Williams Lake before finally making it to Vancouver.

By the time Jesus shows up He is at a four day old funeral full of guests who weren't near as close to Lazarus as He was and yet have arrived before Him.

Isn't this a terrible way to show people that you love them?

And so this text is set up around 3 responses to Jesus' tardy arrival. First Martha, then Mary then the crowd come questioning whether He really loved them like He said He did.

Let's look at Martha's response first starting in verse 20

[Read John 11:20-24]

Interestingly Mary and Martha have two main stories in the New Testament: this one and another one in Luke 10. This story is over 60 verses long stretching through to chapter 12 while the story in Luke 10 is only four verses long. And yet it is the Luke 10 story that is much better known. The text there tells us:

As Jesus and His disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed

only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42)

Martha is a good woman. She is the responsible one in charge of the house. She is also the one who is credited with offering Jesus hospitality. And for that reason she’s in the kitchen. But Martha isn’t really a people person, she is a type-A get stuff done person. I like her.

But you know how this turns out. Martha gets the short end of the stick. Mary the younger, more emotional, less responsible, a little bit lazy sister gets commended for valuing relationship with Jesus over work for Jesus. Oh that’s important!

But that’s not this story. In this story Martha, not Mary responds first to Jesus leaving her emotional, moping sister in the house.

“Lord, if you’d been here, my brother wouldn’t have died!”

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Houdini and his wife Beth were known for being incredibly close. So when he failed to show up on their anniversary Beth didn’t doubt his love, but only his ability to come to her.

But that excuse wasn’t available to Jesus. Martha knew He could have come and His presence would have made a difference. And she is hurt that Jesus who she thought loved her so much would snub her family. And yet, while broken, she hasn’t given up on Jesus.

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

Does Martha think Jesus will raise Lazarus from the dead? The text hints “no” because when Jesus says “Your brother will rise again” she assumes He is talking about the final resurrection on the last day.

But Martha expects Jesus to do something. From that first encounter with Jesus in Luke 10 until now Martha has gotten to know Jesus well – she has heard the authority of His teaching, she has seen His miraculous power at work and she has complete faith that even now He will do something.

That’s Martha. A woman of great responsibility, hard work, logic and faith. And it is to her that Jesus gives the incredible words of truth in verse 25.

[Read John 11:25-26]

Do you believe this? Amen!

Jesus' words to Martha here are for both her and her dead brother Lazarus.

To Martha Jesus says "You believe that the great and glorious day of resurrection is coming. You are right. But here is something amazing – I AM the Resurrection and the Life. I AM the arrival of that day. I'm the Messiah who is bringing that into fulfillment.

The power of Jesus' words must not be missed. As we emphasized last week, while Jesus says some incredible things in this sentence it is His I AM statement that would have rung most clearly.

By saying Ego emi rather than simply emi which would have been grammatically correct, Jesus draws a parallel between Himself and God. In the Old Testament God introduced Himself as the God Named I AM – YHWH – and this became such a sacred word that the Jews wouldn't even speak it when they read it in the text. And yet Jesus comes right out and says I AM – and He says this about Himself.

And with this sentence He tells Martha I Am exactly what your brother needs even today. He's dead and I AM the Resurrection. But I Am also exactly what you need. You aren't dead yet, but you need me too. I'm not just the resurrection, I AM also the Life.

And Jesus continues "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" – that part is for your brother Martha, but there is more: "and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." That part is for you! Amen!

I will rescue Lazarus' dead and decaying body from the grave. Death will not get the final say with him. I will raise him up. But I will also rescue you. I will keep you in eternal fellowship with Me. I Am telling you this. I Am revealing My power and glory to you Martha... because I love you.²

And look how Martha responds in verse 27.

[Read John 11:27]

What a statement of faith! But faith does not equal understanding.

And here those of us who have struggled with understanding what Jesus is doing in our lives receive hope. How many times have we questioned His actions? His timing isn't ours, and when He does act it's rarely what we would expect. A few verses later when Jesus calls for the stone to be rolled away Martha still has no idea what Jesus is up to and her logical side compels her to give the words we laugh at in verse 39.

² I AM section adapted from John Piper's sermon "Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life" <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/jesus-is-the-resurrection-and-the-life> (accessed March 30, 2013)

[Read John 11:39b]

Martha is thinking “The time for visits are passed Jesus, now is the time for stinking! It’s probably better that we leave Lazarus in there until the last days.” Don’t we often have problems with the help Jesus offers?

Luckily for us Jesus’ actions are not dependant on our understanding. All He asks from us is faith. And Jesus reaffirms this for Martha in verse 40.

[Read John 11:40]

And that’s Martha. The first to respond, the first to overcome her pain and doubt and run to Jesus in faith and worship. And she comes with what she has – faith but not understanding. And then once she’s encountered Jesus, she’s the first to take this encounter to someone else. In this case her sister. Look at verse 28.

[Read John 11:28-29]

Mary and Martha are sisters, but Mary isn’t anything like Martha. Mary’s love of relationship that won her Jesus’ favor in Luke is the very thing that is holding her back here.

Mary is an emotional creature, and emotional people get hurt much more easily and deeply than logical people. And Jesus’ slow response to her brother has devastated her and she has been moping at home for days. Isn’t it ironic that so often our strengths are our weaknesses? But this isn’t to say that Mary, like Martha, doesn’t love Jesus. And so, when He calls, she responds.

Look at verse 32

[Read John 11:32]

Notice how she uses the exact same words as Martha: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” – the sisters have obviously been talking about Jesus’ slow response and both know that his absence was the reason for Lazarus’ death. But while Martha is able to look beyond her own pain, Mary is stuck seeing only what has happened.

Implicit in her question are the words: “Where were you Lord when we needed you?” And verse 33 tells us she is weeping as she says this.

But notice her posture while she weeps – verse 32 tells us she is at Jesus’ feet. Mary has been here before. She loves Jesus, she just can’t understand why He didn’t come when she called, and she’s hurt, but she still loves Him.

And perhaps you have been here as well – you’ve encountered hardship in your life and felt like the distance between you and Jesus was large, and yet you made the choice to come and worship. Like Job who after his children were killed when his house collapsed said:

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him (Job 13:15)

And here we see something amazing about Jesus – He meets us where we are: For Martha, Jesus responded with a gift of radical truth that transformed her mind taking her from doubt to faith.

But for Mary notice that Jesus has no words at all.

Verse 33 tells us: “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. And then in verse 35, the shortest verse in the Bible, we read “Jesus wept.”

Regardless of what kind of person you are, whether you are emotional or logical there is room at the feet of Jesus for you. Often us more logical people feel superior to those controlled by their emotions, but the reality is that God created us as whole beings – an emotional response to Jesus is just as valid as a rational one as long as both come to worship.

And here Jesus validates Mary’s emotion by responding in kind.

Jesus wept. What must it have been like to see Jesus weep? My dad isn’t overly stoic, but I’ve only ever seen him weep once and it shook me up. Can you picture Jesus weeping?

More than that, can you understand why He weeps?

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I think Jesus weeps for two reasons.

The first reason Jesus weeps is because death is not what we were designed for. When God created people we were meant to live with Him in perfect harmony forever, and death is the constant reminder that things are not the way they were created to be. And so the Creator weeps.

Last year I attended the funeral of a baby girl exactly the same age as Elliana – I wept as I sat in the back row of the church because the finality of her little life hit home for me as I saw the shoulders of her father heave. He will live out the rest of his days in the shadow of a daughter who beat him to the grave.

But Jesus wasn’t weeping because he wouldn’t see His friend Lazarus again. He knew what He was going to do; He knew that in just a couple minutes Lazarus was going to be walking around as good as new. And yet Jesus weeps!

It isn't missing His friend that brings Jesus to tears, but seeing the reality of our sin broken world. A reality Jesus would die for a week later.

And so for this reason it is ok for Christians to weep at funerals for our fallen brothers and sisters even though we know we will see them again; because death is not what we were designed for. Amen?

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But there is a second reason why Jesus weeps. Look at the words in verse 33. It is when Jesus sees Mary and those around her weeping that He weeps. Why is Mary weeping?

Sure she weeps because her brother is dead. But Mary also weeps because her Lord didn't come when she called.

In her mind Jesus had failed her. She had done everything right. She loved Jesus, she sent for Him in faith, and He didn't come.

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Oh friends don't be hard on Mary. Have we not all called out to God for help and been troubled when His timing was not ours? When the windows of Heaven stayed closed and the voice of God was silent. Or when His answer was "no" not "yes". When instead of taking away our suffering, our pain or our death when we pleaded with Him, He responded with words like:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

And in these moments, brothers and sisters, have we not doubted the goodness of our Lord?

Martha's mind enables faith in spite of the situation she finds herself in, but Mary, who has sat at Jesus' feet, seen His power in action, believed His claims about Himself, still doubts that Jesus is good. "Where were you Lord, when we needed you?" And friends, Jesus weeps at Mary's doubt.

Praise be to God this isn't where the story ends.

The third group of people who come to Jesus in this story are the crowd of Jews. It was cultural when someone died for the community to surround the family and mourn with them for up to a month. And so this is what they are doing.

After Jesus wept we get verse 36

[Read John 11:36-37]

They too doubt Jesus' love for this family. Why didn't He stop this from happening?

But Jesus has no words for them either. The time for reasoning had passed. And the time for action, the time for resurrection, the time for life was at hand. And so with authority we get the words of verse 39 "Take away the stone."

Martha resists temporarily, and then we finally get the resolution we have been waiting for since Jesus' words in verse four

"This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." (John 11:4)

Then Jesus prayed and death met defeat. The Author and Creator, the I AM and the Resurrection and the Life called out in verse 43 "Lazarus, come out!"

There is no debate. There is no struggle to overcome. There is no lock to be picked or chains to be escaped from. When The Resurrection and The Life speaks life is the result. Look at verse 44

[Read John 11:44]

And in this moment Jesus is vindicated. He did love Mary and Martha and Lazarus and He wanted the best for them. In fact this entire event was planned because He loved them enough to let them go through pain so they could see Him not just as healer but as I AM. And not only them, but the crowd and His disciples who were there and everyone who will come to trust in His Name. This is why, speaking of His tardy response to Lazarus, Jesus could say to His disciples:

For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. (John 11:15)

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Today is Easter Sunday. The day we celebrate the resurrection of the God-Man named I AM The Resurrection and the Life. And this morning the message from this text is clear: Jesus is powerful beyond any of the troubles you face, and more than that He loves you and wants to show Himself to you through your situation.

The question is, will you trust Him? In the midst of the difficulties you face can you believe that Jesus really loves you?

Martha and Mary learned they could. Though Jesus led them through the valley of the shadow of death they learned that it was there I AM was waiting to meet them where they were. And brothers and sisters, He met them so that you might believe and have the same resurrection and life they experienced.