JESUS, THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

John 11:1–57

Key Verses: 11:25,26

“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?’”

Have you ever really wanted something, but didn’t get it? Especially from somebody you thought cared about you? When such a thing happens, it can make us doubt, or even despair. In the opening of today’s passage we see this happening to some close friends of Jesus. Jesus doesn’t give them what they want but plans to give them something so much better. Chapter 11 has Jesus’ most amazing miraculous sign in John’s Gospel, and, one of his most powerful “I am” statements. At the same time, we see his humanity fully on display. His words here are some of the most precious promises in the whole Bible. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at verses 1–3. Here the author introduces us to three siblings: Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Who are they? First of all, it says that they lived in a town called Bethany; it was less than two miles east of Jerusalem (18). Bethany was a wealthy suburb; people who owned homes there were well-to-do. These three siblings were no strangers to Jesus; they already had a close relationship with him. Look at verse 5. It tells us that Jesus himself loved them. Of course Jesus loved everybody, but he had a special relationship with these three. Luke 10 tells us that on at least one other earlier occasion these two sisters, Martha and Mary, opened their home to Jesus and his disciples. Today’s passage also shows that these siblings were well-known to many Jews living in Jerusalem (19). It suggests that their family had a high social standing. Since the Bible never mentions their parents, some believe these siblings had been orphaned and were living in their parents’ home. Look at verse 2. Here the author explains that one of the siblings, Mary, had become very famous as the woman who had poured perfume on Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. It emphasizes the strong love relationship these people had with Jesus. Look at verse 3. These sisters knew that Jesus was busy preaching to crowds, teaching his disciples and healing all kinds of sick people. But now they had a personal problem: their brother Lazarus was sick, and he was someone Jesus knew personally and loved. What’s more, his sickness was not minor; it was deadly serious. When they sent a message to Jesus, they were sure he would come right away.

How did Jesus respond to their message? Read verse 4. Jesus made a great prediction: Lazarus’ sickness would be a great opportunity for God to be glorified. In fact, all kinds of hard or tragic things in our lives are opportunities for God to be glorified (Ge50:20; Ro8:28). As the passage unfolds, we see that Lazarus’ sickness did lead to death. But we also see that his death was not the end; in fact, Jesus would raise him back to life. This great miracle would glorify God and help people see the ultimate greatness of Jesus. What is the ultimate greatness of Jesus? Many great people can do many great things. But only Jesus can raise the dead. And his raising the dead glorifies God, because it shows God’s almighty power and his great love for each and every human being.

Then we see an unusual twist in the story. Look at verses 6,7. It’s telling us that even though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, he purposely didn’t go to them right away; he stayed where he was two more days. In other words, he waited until Lazarus was good and dead. That seems like a strange kind of love! Why would anyone stay away from people they love when they need them the most? It tells us that Jesus’ love is different from ordinary human love. Jesus’ love is spiritual. What is spiritual love? It’s a love that seeks to help people on a deeper level, with their more important, underlying life issues. Sometimes it involves leaving people alone until these life issues can come to the surface. So it’s a riskier kind of love, and it’s more easily misunderstood.

At the present, Jesus and his disciples had left Judea, because the Jews there were waiting to take his life; they were up in the north, in the hill country east of the Sea of Galilee, far away from any Jewish threat (10:39,40). It would take a couple of days to get back down to Judea. Look at verse 7 again. Jesus takes this opportunity to help his disciples. How do they react? Look at verse 8. They really don’t want to go back to Judea. They think it’s smarter to stay away and engage in ministry where there will be no drama. In fact, in that place, many were coming to believe in Jesus (10:42). So why go back to such a hostile place? What did Jesus say to them? Read verses 9,10. Jesus gives a parable from everyday life to show us how to live in this world. When we’re walking around but have no light, it’s so easy to stumble. It’s a metaphor for not having any spiritual sight. What does it mean to have light? It means to be close to Jesus, the light of the world. John’s Gospel has already repeatedly told us that Jesus is “the light” (1:4,5,7–9; 3:19–21; 8:12; 9:5). His light is a major theme. His light does many things for us, but in this case it especially takes away our fear. The disciples were following Jesus, but deep within they were still struggling with the fear of death. That fear was blinding them to see how God was leading them. Jesus, however, could see that it was God’s time for him to go back to Judea, even though they were determined to kill him. In so many cases in life, it’s hard to know what to do or where or when to go or stay. This is why we all need Jesus our light to show us the way. When we have Jesus, we have nothing to be afraid of.

Jesus goes on to tell them more. Look at verse 11. Jesus had a clear conviction of why he was going back to Judea. How did the disciples respond? Look at verses 12,13. Their fear was blocking them from understanding Jesus. Look at verses 14,15. Here we see what Jesus really has in his heart. He’s not sorrowful about his friend Lazarus’ death, or afraid of what’s going to happen to him personally. He really wants to help his disciples believe. Of course they already believe in Jesus; otherwise, they wouldn’t be following him in the midst of all that controversy. But their faith in Jesus needed to deepen. It needed to go so deep that it would take away their greatest fear—their fear of death. For most people, death seems really scary. But in Jesus, death is like taking a nap. Jesus promises that one day he will come back and wake us up from the sleep of death and take us to be with him forever. All we need to do is really believe in him. Only faith in Jesus can really heal us of our fear of death. Look at verse 16. Thomas seems noble here, like he’s ready to die with and for Jesus. But he doesn’t really understand what Jesus has been saying.

Look at verses 17–19. Now Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days; his body had begun to decompose. Also, Mary and Martha’s home was now full of people from Jerusalem who had come for the funeral services. These sisters were the object of such sympathy because their parents were gone, and now, their one and only brother was gone, too. It was a hard situation for anyone to help people believe. Look at verse 20. Somehow Martha heard that Jesus was coming, so she went out to meet him. She seems like the most responsible person. Also, she knows that Jesus is controversial, so perhaps she’s trying to keep him away from all those Jews from Jerusalem who are at her house.

Martha starts out by saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” It’s a mixture of both faith and disappointment. But what stands out is how the author repeats what Martha says. She keeps saying, “I know.” In verse 22 she says, “But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” In verse 24 she says, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” In verse 27 she also gives what seems to be the perfect response to Jesus: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” Martha knows *everything*! But there seems to be a disconnect between what she knows in her head with what she believes in her heart. For example, in the very next verse, she tells her sister Mary, “The Teacher is here.” What happened to calling him “the Messiah” and “the Son of God”? And then, though she says she believes God will even now give Jesus whatever he asks, down in verse 39, when Jesus wants to take away the stone from Lazarus’ tomb, Martha objects, saying, “But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” What happened to God giving Jesus whatever he asks? What’s Martha’s problem? She trusts Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. But she doesn’t yet understand him. Her faith in him has not yet reached into real life issues of life and death. The power of death is so strong that she can’t imagine Jesus doing anything about it. She believes the theology of the resurrection at the last day, but she doesn’t yet fully believe in the living Jesus and the life and power he gives.

How does Jesus help her? In verse 23 he tells her, “Your brother will rise again.” And when she doesn’t understand what he really means, he goes even deeper. Read verses 25,26. These are such important words of our Lord Jesus. What does he mean that he is the resurrection and the life? As one of the “I am” statements, it’s another proof that Jesus is God. Jesus said earlier, “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it” (5:21). Jesus is not only the bread of life who satisfies our souls; he’s not only the light of the world who leads and guides us; he’s not only the gate and the good shepherd who knows, protects, loves and saves us; he’s the resurrection and the life who sets us free from all the elements of death. What are the elements of death? They might better be said to be the influence or the affects of death in our lives. When someone we know or love dies, or even comes close to death, we’re all affected. We feel sorrowful. We feel meaningless. We become fearful. The Bible says that the devil uses the fear of death to hold people all their lives as his slaves (Heb2:14,15). Jesus came to break this power of the devil over our lives, and root it out of our hearts.

But how? It won’t happen with a bolt of lightning. The only way is for us to hold onto Jesus’ words. Read verses 25,26 again. Jesus is promising that if we believe in him, we will live. It’s not just something that happens after we die; it starts right now. When we truly believe in Jesus, we have eternal life right now; we cross over from death to life (5:24). It means Jesus wakes us up from being spiritually dead, from just going along with the ways of this world (Eph2:2,3). He gives us a brand new spiritual life. The life Jesus gives us drives out all the elements of death from our souls. So, even though during our lives on earth we taste death in various ways, through sickness or loss or aging, Jesus gives us the power of life to transcend it. The life Jesus gives us feeds on the light of God and the love of God, which overcome all the darkness of death. When we feel the power of death trying to come over us, making us sorrowful or fearful, we need to come to Jesus, the resurrection and the life, who can drive it all away and fill us with his love, joy and peace. Jesus also promises here that when we believe in him, we will never die. How do we know this for sure? We never see anyone who never dies. Honestly, it’s hard to believe, especially in this messed up, unjust world in which tragedies and loss happen all the time. But we can know it when we hold onto Jesus’ promises to us personally.

In verses 28–44 we see the dramatic raising of Lazarus. It starts when Mary goes out to see Jesus. She says the same thing as her sister, minus the “I know”; she doesn’t try to impress Jesus with her answers, she just falls at his feet (32). But we also see how Jesus responds as he encounters the death of Lazarus. First it says he is “deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” In Greek it literally says he’s angry. Why angry? It’s because he can see what the power of death is doing to the people he loves. It’s making them so sorrowful, so scared, so helpless. Next, it says, “Jesus wept” (35). In Greek it’s a different word than the weeping of the others, which is loud; Jesus’ weeping simply meant he was shedding tears, and it was quiet. Why is Jesus weeping? Has death stung him, too? People misunderstood that it was his love for his friend Lazarus (36,37). But Jesus’ weeping is special. It shows both how he shared our grief and pain, and, how he grieves when we are overcome by the power of death. Finally, these verses show Jesus’ determination to break the power of death over all human beings. Read verse 39a. No one could address this problem, but Jesus confronted it directly. Jesus challenges us, too, to take away the stone of death from over our hearts. When Martha objected, Jesus rebuked her out of his great love. Read verse 40. These are very powerful words. Even in the most hopeless situation, where death seems insurmountable, we can see the glory of God. There’s just one condition: we have to believe. It’s repeated in today’s passage so many times. Jesus told his disciples he wanted them to believe (15). He told Martha he wanted her to believe (26). Now he again says that if we believe, we’ll see the glory of God (40). What happens? Look at verses 41,42. First Jesus prays. He again mentions he wants people to believe. Then he raises Lazarus with his loud command (43,44). Jesus’ words still have power to raise the dead and give life to the spiritually dead. In that dark environment, the religious leaders could only think about the political ramifications of Jesus’ miracle (45–48). The high priest, not knowing what he was saying, actually predicted Jesus’ death (49–53). Jesus had to withdraw again with his disciples to wait on God’s right time at the upcoming Passover (54–57).

Today we heard our Lord Jesus’ amazing words: “I am the resurrection and the life.” May God help us believe his promises, be set free from our fears and sorrows, and challenge the power of death all around us with the power of faith in him.