

The Raising of Lazarus

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Sermon Series:
Following Jesus
Around

John 11:1-44

*Jesus is never
rushed by other
people's
expectations.
...he sets his
own agenda.*

There are 31,173 verses in the Bible. If you don't believe me, you can count them. The shortest verse in the Bible is contained within our Scripture lesson. Verse 35 consists of only two words, "Jesus wept."

When our kids were in junior high and high school, our family shared a meal with another family with kids about the same age. This family observed a tradition in their home of reciting a Bible verse from memory before the evening meal. They invited our kids to partake in this tradition with them. I suppose the parents thought the preacher's family would be a good bet for immediate Scripture recall. I stole a glance at my kids at this moment. They had the most panicked expression on their faces, since they knew they would have to produce a Bible verse from memory on the spot. When it was Andrew's turn, my ever-resourceful son smiled and recited the verse, "Jesus wept." Nice save!

"Jesus wept" may be the shortest verse in the Bible, but it gives us insight into the level of friendship Jesus shares with Lazarus and his two sisters. I suspect they're the kind of friends with whom you can unwind and be yourself. I imagine Lazarus, Mary and Martha are the kind of friends who don't require you to keep the conversation going or need to be entertained.

It's an unspoken rule among good friends that when they need you, you drop whatever you're doing to help them. But when Jesus receives word that Lazarus is ill, he stays put two more days (1:6). John gives us no indication there is any urgency in the work Jesus is currently doing, so why the delay? Some commentators suggest he is waiting for Lazarus to die in order that a more impressive miracle can be performed.

Somehow, I don't think so. Jesus is never rushed by other people's expectations. Even his closest friends cannot force him to pick up the pace. Jesus is his own man; he sets his own agenda. To borrow Abraham Maslow's words, he is the epitome of a "self-actualized" man. Jesus will not be controlled by external forces but solely by his determination to do the will of God.

Two days elapse before Jesus decides to visit Lazarus's family with his disciples (11:7). While they are enroute, Jesus tells them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep but I am going to wake him" (11:11). It's typical in the gospels for Jesus to speak allegorically, while his disciples interpret what he says literally. "If he is sleeping, then he will get better." They miss the point entirely. Jesus clarifies the situation, "Lazarus is dead" (11:14).

They arrive in Bethany. John tells us Lazarus has already been

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dead four days (11:17). Working backwards, that must mean when Jesus is informed two days previously that Lazarus was sick, he must have already died. It takes one day for the messengers to reach Jesus, two more days for Jesus to stay where he is and one day for Jesus to return to Bethany.

Martha takes the initiative in greeting Jesus. If you know anything about these two sisters, you will recognize that Martha is acting true to form. She greets Jesus with the words, "If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died" (11:21), which are the same words Mary will use to welcome Jesus a few verses later (11:32). Jesus says plainly to Martha, "Your brother will rise again" (11:23). Martha expresses the prevailing Hebrew perspective, "I know that he will rise again at the last day" (11:24). Orthodox Judaism believed in a final resurrection on the last day, which leads Jesus to utter the extraordinary words, "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25).

Jesus is deeply moved at the grief of his two friends (11:33, 38). This is the point in the story where we are told, "Jesus wept" (11:35).

Jesus proceeds to the tomb and orders the stone to be rolled away (11:38). Martha balks, "By this time there is an odor for he has already been in the tomb four days" (11:39). The fourth day reference is significant here. The people of Jesus' day believed the spirit of the deceased hovered around the body for three days, seeking entrance into the body. But on the fourth

day when decomposition sets in, the spirit leaves the body. In other words, the fourth day represents the absolute finality of death.

Jesus reminds his followers, "Didn't I tell you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God" (11:40), which take us back to what Jesus said at the outset in verse 4.

The miracle itself is rather brief, a total of two verses. I would have expected more, given all the build-up in the story. The raising of Lazarus is told in a simple, matter-of-fact manner. Jesus orders Lazarus out of the tomb. A dead man walks out. I thought of titling this sermon "Dead man... Walking." I also entertained calling it "The Grateful Dead."

John sees special significance in this Lazarus story. It appears at the precise midpoint of John's gospel. This story serves as the climax to Jesus' ministry. How do you improve on bringing a dead man back to life?

Notice what immediately follows in John's gospel. Some people tell the religious authorities what Jesus has done, prompting them to convene the religious council (11:46-47). "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our temple and our nation." From that day forward, the religious leaders plot to take his life (11:53).

I find it ironic that Jesus' death is set in motion immediately following his raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus' death ultimately results from raising a dead man to life.

I'm always amused when I hear someone say, "If something should happen to me...." What do you mean if?

John wants us to see that Jesus gives life. The word "life" appears 36 times in John's gospel alone. "I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, even though they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (11:25-26).

I recite Jesus' words at every funeral. Some of you are uncomfortable talking about death. In fact, some of us are loath to use the word. We prefer words like passed away, passed on, expiration or departure. I'm always amused when I hear someone say, "If something should happen to me...." What do you mean if? It's not "if" but "when." The death rate is 100 percent.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus said. The life Jesus gives us is not only a future promise, but a present reality. Jesus is the present realization of what Mary and Martha expect on the last day. That's why the verb "I am" appears in present tense.

Jesus said to his followers, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly" (10:10). John concludes his gospel this way: "These [words] are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

There are two Greek words for life in the New Testament: *bios*, from which we derive our English word biology, and *zoa*, where the word zoology originates. When Jesus says "I am the resurrection

and the life," he doesn't reference biological life, he declares himself to be the source of a richer, fuller way of life. We not only remember Jesus as a historical personage but as a living reality for our lives.

How could I describe the difference between these two Greek words? Think of it as the difference between coffee served at a restaurant where the pot has been sitting all afternoon versus freshly brewed coffee at a coffee bar such as Starbucks.

Can you imagine going into Starbucks and saying, "I'd like a medium cup of coffee." The employees would stop dead in their tracks and look at you as though you had just landed from outer space. For starters, you've got to get the lingo straight. Tall is not tall, it's small. If you want a medium, you must say grande, which normally means large. I can't get by with ordering a medium cup of coffee, I must order a *caffè grande*. There are 36 varieties of *caffè* from which to choose: cappuccino, espresso, latte, mocha, you name it.

Just as there is a difference between coffee that has been brewing in a pot all afternoon versus freshly brewed Starbucks coffee, so there is a disparity between merely existing versus being truly and fully alive.

John wants us to realize that Jesus gives life. Walk back through the stories from John's gospel we've examined these last two months. Jesus offers new birth to Nicodemus, living water to a Samaritan woman, new sight to a man born

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blind, a new start to a woman caught in adultery and new direction to 12 disciples. And not just to them alone, but to everyone who trusts in him to make good on his promises. At the very moment someone puts his trust in Jesus Christ, that person experiences new life. Jesus can raise you up. He does so at the last day, and he can do so today.

The Poisonwood Bible is a 1998 best-selling novel which chronicles the story of a zealous missionary named Nathan Price, who, with his wife and four daughters, moves in 1959 from Georgia to the Congo to bring souls to Christ. Price was blind to the surrounding realities of the Congolese culture. He never bothered to learn the intricacies of their language. "Tata Jesus is Bangala" he shouted during his sermons. It never occurred to him that in the Congolese language everything hinges on intonation. Bangala can mean something precious and everlasting, but it also means poisonwood—a virulent local plant—when spoken in the flat accent of an American zealot. What he meant to say was that "Jesus is eternal life" but instead, what he actually said was, "Jesus is poisonwood." Nathan Price spends his whole life believing he is proclaiming eternal life when, in fact, the people hear him say poisonwood.

Maybe that's why people stay away from the church. They think Jesus is out to give them a hard time or spoil their fun rather than give them life. They think of

Jesus, to use C. S. Lewis's words, as some cosmic killjoy who wants to make sure no one is having a good time. This, of course, is terribly false. In reality, the devil is the great cosmic killjoy. Jesus wants to give us life: eternal life, abundant life, real life!

