

PM John 11:17-44 No if-onlys

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- [0 : 00] Passage, the raising of Lazarus. Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.
- Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him.
- But Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.
- But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again.
- Martha said to him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.
- [1 : 15] Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?
- She said to him, Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world. When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, The teacher is here and is calling for you.
- And when she heard this, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.
- Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.
- When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, wherever you laid him, they said to him, Lord, come and see.
- [2 : 40] Jesus wept. So the Jews said, see how he loved him. But some of them said, could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?
- Then Jesus replied, sorry, then Jesus deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave and the stone lay against it.
- Jesus said, take away the stone. Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, Lord, by this time, there will be an odour, for he's been dead four days.
- Jesus said to her, did I not tell you that if you believe, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone and Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.
- I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you have sent me. When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

[3 : 54] The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen, linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, unbind him and let him go.

Amen. Amen. This evening text is another, I am, saying of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this case, verses 25 and 26 of John 11. Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.

And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? The story of the raising of Lazarus affirms the hope of resurrection without seeking to deny the reality of physical death.

I was asked just this evening, how long have I been a minister? Not very long, actually. I came into ministry quite late. I was 54 when I sold the business I had in the town.

[5 : 18] Some of you knew that business. And I went to college for four years to study theology. And during, in the early part of those four years, in fact, right at the very beginning of those four years, my eldest son, James, died in very tragic circumstances.

And so for my dissertation, in my fourth year, I decided to research what a Christian response should be to death, grief, and mourning.

My reasoning for this was that how was I going to minister to others in their loss if I hadn't come to terms with my loss. And interestingly enough, the very first, the very first funeral that I led in Fort William when we got there was of a man who had taken his own life.

So, the Bible doesn't deny the reality of physical death. But the story of Lazarus affirms the hope of resurrection.

And that's what I'd like us to think about tonight. But before we look at this passage more closely, I would like us to consider the ability that we have to reflect on the past and indulge in the very human habit of desiring to change events that have shaped the past and that have had consequences for our present and our future.

[7 : 01] So, with this in mind, I don't know if any of you ever saw the trilogy Back to the Future. Did anyone see that? Do you know it's 40 years nearly since that came out?

I can't quite believe it myself. Michael J. Fox played Marty McFly. And he meets an eccentric doc who's created a time machine from a DeLorean car.

Remember the DeLorean car with the doors that went up like this? There can't be many of them left now. They are then, both the doc and Marty, accidentally transported back in time by 30 years from 1985 to 1955.

Marty meets his parents who are themselves teenagers at that time and his mother becomes infatuated with Marty. That's a problem. So, Marty's task is to get his mum and dad together while seeking a way back to the future.

So, that's part one. Part two and three involve Marty travelling into the future to 2015 and then back in time to 1885 to correct subsequent events before all the damage that is first visited in 1955 so that all this damage is corrected.

[8 : 30] We actually went to Monument Valley and we saw where, I don't know if you've seen the film, but they built a false screen and the train comes bursting through the screen. And that's, we went to Monument Valley a few years ago.

It was great to go there and to see that. The whole point of this series was to change something in a previous generation. The past, in the past, that will mean that the present and the future can be different.

And although this is a story, I think it's a good example of something that we as human beings fall into the trap of wishing for. something that I've called if only's.

I'm the eldest of seven. My mum, my mum was a gem. She was the glue that held the family together.

And my dad was a very difficult character and unfortunately had a drink problem. And my mum contracted kidney disease in her early 50s. She was 53 years old.

[9 : 39] And it caused her to become frail. And there was no way that they were prepared to give a transplant had one been available because they argued that her other organs weren't strong enough for her to have the operation.

And it made me very sad because she was full of if-only's. If only I hadn't this. If only I hadn't done that.

And we can find ourselves saying, if only. I mean, when was the last time you said to yourself, if only? If only I'd worked harder at school and passed my exams.

If only I'd taken that job opportunity. If only I hadn't listened to that piece of advice. If only I hadn't lost my temper. If only I'd kept my mouth shut.

I think if only can be the saddest two words in the English language. And in this evening's Bible reading, both Martha and her sister Mary say exactly the same thing to Jesus in relation to the death of their brother.

[10 : 50] In essence, they too are expressing, if only. If only you had been here, my brother would not have died. We can all look to the past with regret and look at the present with disappointment and frustration.

Both the fallings of our own lives and the Back to the Future trilogy are good examples of our wistful desires sometimes to turn back the clock.

But instead of looking to the past and worrying about what might have been, Jesus invites Martha to look to the future when he says in verse 23, your brother will rise again.

And as I actually studied John 11 for my dissertation, because it's amazing how much of the process of grief we read in this story as now realized by psychologists, there is a process that we go through when we lose someone that we love.

And all the pointers are there if you read this passage. It's amazing. From the seeming flattery nature of Martha's response, she says, I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

[12 : 13] I think it's likely that Martha would have understood Jesus' words as commonplace, words of consolation that others may have already said to her since her brother's death, from which she could only take cold comfort.

See, Martha and many others of her generation would have believed in the future resurrection of the dead. They would remember the scriptures. Daniel 12 verse 2 says, And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, others to shame, and everlasting contempt.

Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 65, 17 and 18, For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall be remembered no more or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create. For behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy and her people to be a gladness. As I read this passage in Isaiah, just as a little aside, verse 20 caused me to think of a former member of Fort William Baptist Church who went to be with her Lord aged 103 years.

Isaiah goes on to write, He who dies at 100 will be thought of as a mere youth. I think that's amazing. In relation to eternity, our current longevity is just a snip of time compared to God's eternity.

[13 : 44] But back to the focus of today's sermon. Suffice to say that apart from the Sadducees, this is a terrible joke, but never mind. Why are the Sadducees sad?

Because they didn't believe in the resurrection. People believed in the resurrection of the dead generally, and I believe that Martha would have believed in the resurrection of the dead.

God's new creation, the new heaven, and the new earth will be like ours, but the beauty and power will be enhanced. There'll be no more pain, no more suffering, no more ugliness, or grief, or sorrow.

All these will be abolished. John's vision in Revelation continues this theme. Revelation 21, verse 1, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for a husband. And verse 4 says, He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.

[14 : 56] Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. We see that Jesus, having asked Martha to look to the future, then asks Martha to imagine that the future is suddenly brought forward into the present.

Jesus challenges Martha to exchange her, if only, for Jesus. The Apostle John begins his Gospel by telling us that the preexistent Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, has burst into the present in the form of Jesus, born as a baby in Bethlehem.

The Alpha and the Omega, the Eternal One, broke into time. Some of these concepts I can't quite fight hard to get my head around, but that's the reality.

Jesus has not just come from heaven to earth, he's come from God's future into our present, into the mess and muddle of the world we know. The new creation and the resurrection has come forward from the end of time to Martha's present and to our present also.

You see, God's eschological promises are realized today in Jesus. Remember when I first heard that word, I thought, what? Eschatology. Eschatological.

[16 : 30] Eschatology refers to the end times when God will once again return in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and bring time as we know it to an end. See, the resurrection isn't just a doctrine, nor is it a future fact.

Jesus says, I am the resurrection. The resurrection is Jesus, the God-man, and he's standing right in front of Martha asking her to take a huge leap of faith and to trust in him for the future.

If Jesus is God's own son, the promised Messiah, the one promised by the prophets, then he is the one in whom the living God is manifest in human flesh.

He is the resurrection in person. John chapter 1 tells us, all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made.

In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it. Did Martha grasp all of this in her conversation with Jesus?

[17 : 38] I think clearly she doesn't because in verse 38 when Jesus asks that the stone be removed from Lazarus' tomb, she tells him, by this time there will be an odour for he's been dead four days.

Four days is significant because the Jewish people believed that the spirit stayed with the body until the fourth day and then the spirit left the body.

The whole point of the miracle of the restoration of life to Lazarus is to show the glory of God manifest in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a shine shared with many that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

And there are numerous other verses throughout the Gospel of John that point to this passage. 316 very familiar to us. Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. John 3.36 Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God remains on him.

[18 : 51] John 5.24 Truly, truly I say to you whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.

I love this image of passing over. The one indisputable statistic is that one day we will all physically die.

This passage doesn't deny the reality of physical death but it does confirm that death is not the end for those who've placed their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

there's a passing over a bridging of the gap between here and an eternal future with God which is to be found in and through his Son the Lord Jesus.

This miracle of the raising of Lazarus is a meeting of the supernatural with the physical. God gave us common sense for this world but what's happening here requires supernatural sense.

[20 : 00] we can't fully comprehend it but we're aware of the reality albeit unseen of an eternal future with God. This verse from Ecclesiastes Ecclesiastes 3.11 He has made everything beautiful in its time also he has put eternity into men's hearts yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end.

These verses are part of the very well known passage where the writer possibly Solomon reflects on his life. So let's look in more detail at this evening's text.

Two tightly constructed parallels in verses 25b and 26a if you've got your Bible there built around the verbs believe live and die.

25b whoever believes in me though he die yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

25b says the one who believes in me though he die yet shall he live. the focus of 25b is the effect that believing in Jesus has on the believer's death.

[21 : 26] It does not deny the fact that they will physically die but it emphasizes the reality of eternity with Christ. 26a says and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

It may be that the Lord might return before we die and take us to be with him but in any event all those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ will have an eternal future with God.

The focus of this verse is the impact that believing in Jesus has on a believer's life now. As believers we will not reach the end of our life full of regret.

There will be no if-onlys. Rather we can live our present life full of hope. This is glorious good news friends. Jesus being the resurrection means that physical death has no power over believers whatsoever.

A believer's future is determined by a believer's faith in Jesus not by their physical death. death. And the believer's present is also changed. Remember past, present, future.

[22 : 48] For Jesus to be the life means that the believer's present is released from guilt and the burdens of the past. That's what the cross of Christ is all about. God's present.

When a believer repents of their sin and is born again of the Spirit of God, then the believer can know the joy of forgiveness bought for us at the cross. Resurrection, joy, and hope can be a present reality if we accept Jesus into our lives.

We can live free from the past. The consequences of our past actions may not change, but they no longer hold us prisoner. And I think that's a key point here.

So we can live free from the past, and the consequences of our past actions may not change, but they no longer hold us prisoner. So many people are bound by their past.

Bound by if only's. The wonderful truth is that this same Christ broke into time in order to pay the price for the sin of the world.

[24 : 05] This means he died for you and for me. On judgment day as believers, we will stand not in our own self-righteousness, but as those who are saved by the righteousness of the Son of God.

We'll be washed clean of every sin because of his shed blood. There'll be no stain. All the sin of our lives will have been removed. But this gift of life must be accepted by each one of us.

We have to recognize that we need Jesus, that we've sinned, and that we're truly sorry for all our sins. I don't know about you, but how would you feel if suddenly someone projected all the wrongdoings of your life on the wall right now?

I know I would feel very uncomfortable indeed. And some people carry that around with them all their living days. They never know, they never understand that that can be dealt with, and that when they do die, and when they stand before the judgment throne of God, God will welcome them in because he sees us through the righteousness of his Son.

We don't have to go back to the future to change the present if we accept Jesus. Jesus identifies himself as the fulfillment of eschatological expectation.

[25 : 38] In other words, the promise of resurrection and life is not some distant event, not just something for the future, not just to hope that becomes a reality for the believer when they die, but is a reality available already today, now, in the present.

And this being the case, we should be living resurrection lives. If you've accepted the wonderful gift of salvation, you can live in the present and the future rather than being bound to the past.

death. You can experience the unburdening of your sorrows because you're living in the reality of an eternal hope. In other words, if only, you become Jesus.

Jesus offers indestructible life through the resurrection. He's defeated death, which is the ultimate tool of the devil. Death is not the end.

In fact, when we're in Christ Jesus, death is no more sinister than sleep. Look at verse 11. Jesus said, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.

[26 : 50] Verse 11 of chapter 11. I don't know if any of you knew or ever heard Jeffrey Grogan speak. Didn't anyone ever hear?

When I was at college, they were pushing some new thinking in relation to theology called open theism. which basically argues that God knows the past and the present, but isn't sure about the future.

Therefore, we can change God's mind when we pray, which goes against everything I understand about God. But that caused me to go and see Jeffrey Grogan, because I was made aware of a book that he'd written about these matters.

And what a good and godly man he was. And I was very grateful to be able to go and speak with him. And at his funeral service, a friend of his, a minister friend of his, who'd been to visit him in hospital, said that Jeffrey had said to him, I can't remember the minister's name, we'll say it's David.

He said, David, the doctors tell me that it's terminal. He said, but you and I know that it's only transitional. That's really stuck with me.

[28 : 13] Death is not the end. It's not terminal. It's transitional into a new future with God. someone also said, Christians are the living amongst the dead.

Because of Jesus, we've moved from death to life. Our path from the moment we believe in Christ as Lord and Saviour changes direction. Through the gospel, as we've already said, there's no denial of the reality of death.

Jesus himself died on the cross at Calvary. But he was raised to life on the third day. He demonstrated the power and the love of God to overcome death and to give hope.

So we as believers are on a path to life. Even as we grow older and our bodies become increasingly frail, our path is life, not death.

So let's listen to Jesus' words again. I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me though he die, yet shall he live.

[29 : 22] And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? There can't be much better news than that.

Praise God. Amen.