

# Lazarus Encounters Jesus

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Good morning. So, our reading comes from John chapter 11, and it's the first 44 verses. So if you're sitting comfortably, I'll begin by saying that Jesus has left Judea because of the problems with the Jewish authorities who have now got to the point where they're threatening to kill him. So he's gone across the other side of the Jordan to Perea, and he's drawing big crowds there as well. And he's about 25 miles east of Jerusalem and of Bethany, which in that terrain is quite a considerable journey on foot. Now, a man named Lazarus was sick.

He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and his sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick. When he heard this, 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. Now, Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. And then he said to his disciples, let us go back to Judea. But Rabbi, they said, a short while ago, the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you were going back. Jesus answered, are they not 12 hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they will see by this world's light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light. After he had said this, he went on to tell them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up.

His disciples replied, Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better. Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.

Then Thomas, also known as Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, let us go, that we may die with him. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and 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. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that even God will give you whatever you ask.

[ 3 : 4 2 ] Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though he die. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she replied. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world. After she had said this, she went back and called to her sister Mary.

I called her sister Mary aside. The teacher is here, she said, and he's asking for you. When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house comforting her noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

[ 4 : 52 ] When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

Where have you laid him? he asked. Come and see, Lord, they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, see how he loved him.

But some of them 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. Take away the stone, he said. But Lord, said Martha, the sister of the dead man, by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.

Then Jesus said, did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God? So they took away the stone.

[ 6 : 10 ] Then Jesus looked up and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me.

But I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said this, Jesus called out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, take off the grave clothes and let him go.

Thank you, Peter, for that heroic reading. I thought I'd get him to read that whole section.

And I just want to pick a couple of bits out of it in the next hour or so. He's kidding, they hope. We've been looking over the last six or seven weeks at encounters that Jesus had, the way in which he met people where they were.

[ 7 : 27 ] And I think the encounters often surprise. They certainly challenge. And often they change the people who meet Jesus. And my hope and prayer is that this next one will do the same.

It was a really long Bible reading. And, you know, lots of us will know or have heard of this story. I love this painting that I found of it.

You can't quite see. Well, you can just see Jesus in it. But you can see I like it because it really illustrates the story well. See the man nipping his nose. Because, as the King James put it, when Lazarus came out, they said he might stink.

And this is a sermon about, or this is a Bible passage that people often think about being purely about resurrection. But I want us to think about it creatively today.

I don't know about you, but I've never seen a physical resurrection. I'm not sure I ever will. And so we're going to look at this, maybe through slightly different eyes. There are some important dates coming up this week.

[ 8 : 37 ] Can anyone, Tuesday, Wednesday, anyone know what's going on this week? Tuesday is? Tuesday is? Pancake, Shrove Tuesday.

Anyone know what Wednesday is? Anything else? Valentine's Day. Excellent. Excellent. And I want to suggest to us that when we look at this passage today, I want us to look at it through the eyes of love.

Because actually, I think that the main message throughout this whole passage tells us about God's love. I decided I'd just write loveies and not get the old, I don't know how many of you remember the loveies cartoon, with the two cartoon characters.

I could not find an appropriate one, actually, because they're both naked in all of the cartoons. So I thought I'd just stick with that. But I want us to think about what's distinctive about God's love.

And I've got four things I want us to think about why I think God's love and Jesus' love is different and distinctive. So first of all, I think we can see in this passage that God's love is different because it's strong.

[ 9 : 50 ] So if you've got a Bible, you know you might want to open it. If you've got the Bible on your phone, that's great. I'll keep taking my glasses on and off so I can see a few bits. So Peter contextualizes it really nicely.

Mary and Martha and Lazarus, they were friends of Jesus. Lots of Bible scholars think they probably grew up together. They live in a town called Bethany, which is really close to the capital, which is called Jerusalem.

Jesus probably traveled to Jerusalem at least once a year. And Bethany, if you like, is thought to be his sort of travel lodge. It's where he stayed just outside of town when he was visiting the temple for the festivals in Jerusalem.

And so he knew Mary and Martha. And in the Bible, when Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, is sick, they tell Jesus that the one that you love is sick.

And it's true that Jesus loved Lazarus. But English is a really poor language. The word love encompasses a whole range of things, doesn't it?

[ 11 : 01 ] I love curry with a cold beer. I love my children. I love my wife. And I love Chelsea. Not necessarily in that order, just saying.

But it's one word. But the Bible, this bit of the Bible, comes to us from Greek. And in Greek, there are different words. And when Mary and Martha say that Jesus loves Lazarus, they use this word called philio.

It said, the one you philio, the one you love is sick. And philio means sort of have affection for. It's where we get the idea of brotherly love.

Although as one of three brothers and with three boys myself, I have to say I'm not sure that's the most apt description of affection for one another. But it's sort of fondness.

It's niceness. It's wanting nice things for each other. But when John describes how Jesus loved Lazarus, where it says that Jesus loved Lazarus, it uses a different word.

[ 12 : 17 ] It uses this word in Greek, agape. And that means a really deep, a strong, a different love. It means the kind of love that will put somebody else first.

It's love that will sacrifice and prefer somebody else. It's not casual love. And the tense, I'm no Greek scholar, but I read from somebody who does.

They said the tense that this is written in is really important. It's an imperfect tense. And it means he did love Lazarus. He does love Lazarus.

And he will always love Lazarus. Jesus' love is different. Downstairs in the youngest kids group, we often use a Bible called the Jesus Storybook Bible.

And it has this beautiful phrase where it describes this love. I wrote it down. And it says, it's a never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.

[ 13 : 23 ] Jesus' love is different because it's strong. Jesus' love is also different because if we're honest, it can be surprising.

I don't know how many times you can read bits in the Bible and then sometimes you look at it or you hear someone talk about it and you go, I had never read that before. And this time when I looked at it, I think so much of this passage hangs on one word.

So in verse 5 it says this, Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. And he's just heard that Lazarus is sick, that he's hurt.

When was it? Not last summer, but the summer before. We always go on, frequently we go on holiday to Yorkshire. And we all stay in the same place.

And me and the boys love going for long runs. And I was right at this sort of about three miles away, probably from our house where we were staying.

[ 14 : 33 ] And it was right at a really high cliff top. And I got a phone call from one of the boys. And they said, Mummy has hurt herself. She'd walked, I think she'd run down the stairs, stubbed her toe, broken it really badly.

Not entirely to get out of breech cricket, I like to think. But they said, you need to come now. She's in a lot of pain. Some of the words she's saying, I've never hurt.

No, they didn't really. And so what did I do? Please, someone, anticipate what I did. I carried on because I was trying to do a half miler.

You know, a half marathon. I, do you know that's what I should have done? You're right. What I did is I started, I ran as fast as I could and got there exhausted.

Because that's what love often does. But that isn't what Jesus does. It says this, look at it. It says, so when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed there for two more days.

[ 15 : 48 ] How does that make any sense? Because God's love can be surprising. It can be different.

And obviously, we have read the end of the story. But John chooses that word because he wants us to understand that God works in a different way.

They couldn't just fast forward to the end of the passage, to verse 44, and see what happens. And sometimes God's love can be confusing to us as well, I think.

But the Bible describes him as being a good father who wants good things for his children. And I don't know, Richard, should we, can you show, I've got a video of, this is my eldest boy, Jacob, learning.

There's all of me there. This is Jacob learning to walk. Go, yay. I am there egging him on to come to me.

[ 16 : 51 ] Come to me, come to me. Come to daddy. I'm going like this. Very steady. And watch. Poor little kid.

Do you know how many times we did that? Again and again and again. Were we being cruel? No, because we knew where it was going. Sometimes the love of a parent can seem strange.

I don't know if you've ever, you know, many of you will have done this, taking your children for vaccinations and held them on your lap while someone sticks a bit of metal in their arm because you know in the long run that that is what is good for them.

If we are honest, God's love can be very surprising. And actually one of the funny things about when you get your kids vaccinated is that if it works right, you never see the benefit.

Do you get what I mean? But we trust that our parents are doing what's right for us. God's love is different because it is surprising.

[ 18 : 04 ] Can you go to the next? Oh, you have gone to the next. Thank you. The next reason why I think God's love is different is because it's really personal.

Mary and Martha are very different sisters. We see that from some of the other stories, that they behave in different ways. They relate to God in different ways.

And because of this, I think Jesus loves them in different ways. And actually we've seen this. I've only been up here for a few of the sermons on encounters with Jesus, but I've enjoyed listening to them online.

And the one thing that strikes me is how differently Jesus deals with different people. With Zacchaeus, I'm coming to your house today.

With Thomas graciously providing proof that he needed to help him in his doubts. With the Samaritan woman at the well giving her what she didn't even know that she needed, living water.

[ 19 : 14 ] And the same thing happens here. So, you know, we're going to skip over a few verses where Jesus chats to his disciples and they don't get what he's on about. And eventually they do because he plainly tells them, Lazarus is dead.

And it says, On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. And his first interaction is with Martha.

Now, I think there's different ways in which you can read, sort of, or understand the character of Martha. If I'm honest, I've always imagined her as running out to meet Jesus.

We know that she is often found in the kitchen. And if I'm honest, I imagine her still with a rolling pin in her hand as she goes to meet Jesus.

And she says, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. We don't know, but she may well have been angry.

[ 20 : 24 ] She was almost certainly frustrated because she'd heard and seen and witnessed some of the great things that Jesus had done. So why not for her brother?

And Jesus is so gracious with Martha. He doesn't tell her that her frustration is wrong.

He meets her where she is. But in Martha's case, he has a conversation with her. And he corrects her in several ways.

He helps her see from another point of view. He said, your brother will rise again. And she said, yeah, I know eventually in the last day he'll rise again.

Jesus didn't dismiss that because Lazarus will rise again one day. But he actually went further. He said, I'm the solution, not just then.

[ 21 : 27 ] I'm the solution now. I am the resurrection and the life. And I've come to bring life now. Just the chapter before, Jesus had said, the thief comes to steal and kill and destroy.

But I've come to bring you life now in all of its fullness. And so with Martha, he corrects.

He teaches. What happens with Mary? I think it's really interesting. If you read the passage, you find that Mary was in the house.

But she goes out to exactly the same place where Martha was. And you look at the words. She says exactly the same words that Martha says.

Same place, same situation, same words. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

[ 22 : 32 ] But Jesus deals with her very differently. If he gives Martha a sort of a teaching, he gives Mary tears.

If he confronts Martha, then he just gives compassion to Mary. When Jesus saw her weeping, he was deeply moved and he wept.

And I think these two contrasts are something we think of at Christmas all the time, aren't we? We have that name for Jesus, Emmanuel, which means God with us.

He's fully God and he's fully man. He's full of truth to Martha and he's full of grace to Mary.

So God's love is personal. But that isn't all that his love is. Sort of, I always think words without actions or comfort without power in this story would seem not what Jesus came to do.

[ 23 : 46 ] They can only bring so much relief. They can only really bring so much help. John, through his gospel, records seven, they're called signs and wonders, that Jesus does to show people who he is.

The first one, perhaps my favorite, is Jesus turning water into wine. And it goes through and culminates with this final sign or wonder.

And this is the last and perhaps greatest demonstration of who Jesus is. Because he didn't come just to be a good teacher, although he was.

He didn't come just to show us the best way to live, although he did. Ultimately, it says he came to bring us life.

And in seven I am statements that he makes in John. Again, this is one that I think we should look at. He doesn't just say, I came to bring life.

[ 24 : 51 ] He says, I am the resurrection and the life. Jesus' love is powerful because it can bring life.

But his love is also powerful because of how it made him feel and what it made him do.

Again, I don't claim to be a Greek scholar. But I read something about this passage. And that phrase deeply moved that we see twice in this passage.

All scholars think it's a really rubbish translation that we've got in most of our Bibles. And the reason why is because the true meaning of the word is a little bit awkward.

It's a Greek word that they use to describe somebody or something snorting. Snorting in anger.

[ 25 : 50 ] It's the word that they use to describe, you know, that noise that like a big horse that a knight rides on makes before it goes into battle.

That disdain. That determination. That's the word. And actually, what it conveys is that Jesus was angry.

He wasn't just a little bit angry. He was furious. He was furious because he looked at what death was doing. The Bible makes it clear that God hates the choices that we make that go against his best way.

We call it sin. We sang about it in that last song. And he hates sin. And he's angry at it because it brings death. It's not that God likes things neat.

I'm going away next week to a hotel. And it's a really nice one. It's in America. And I know that when I'll get there, it's one of the things I hate when I get to a hotel.

[ 27 : 02 ] There are these throw pillows all on the bed. The most pointless thing in the world. The first thing I do is that. And I think it's easy for us to think that God likes order and doesn't like sin because he likes things to be just so, to be neat.

But the Bible describes something very different. That sin is like dirt. It's like a germ which gets into wounds and harms you and harms everybody around you.

And because of that, Jesus is angry. His powerful love leads to a powerful emotion. But it also leads to a powerful action as well.

Jesus calls out to Lazarus in a loud voice, come out. And just before that, the people were really concerned because Lazarus had been dead for four days.

It's a pretty warm place. Hence the man at the beginning going like this. But actually in Hebrew culture as well, the fact he'd been dead for four days really mattered.

[ 28 : 20 ] They had this sort of superstition that meant that for three days after you died, it's a bit like the film Ghost. For three days after you died, who was it?

Patrick Swayze is sort of still hanging around the body. And that there might be some natural way in which life could come back. But after three days, you weren't just mainly dead.

You were really dead. Princess Bride quote for those who've got it there. And so Jesus brings life where nobody else can.

Jesus brings life where everybody else believes there's no hope left. And he brings life to Lazarus.

And he also brings life back to Mary and Martha. He brings comfort and deals with their distress. And the outcome, it says many people believe.

[ 29 : 24 ] And so how do we apply this to our lives? Well, the Bible says that the word is alive and active.

And so we need to think about how we put this in action in our lives. As I told you, I've been to some wakes in my time and they were quite lively. I've been to lots of funerals.

And although they had hope, I've never seen anyone physically raised from the dead. And I'm not sure I ever will. So how can we learn? What can we put into practice this week from this story?

Well, the Bible says that Jesus and by consequence, his love is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

And because of that, all of the things that I've just said about Jesus' love for Mary and Martha and Lazarus are true for you here today, no matter who you are.

[ 30 : 31 ] Mary and Martha and Lazarus, really different. We're all really different. But Jesus loves you passionately as well. He didn't love Mary and Martha and Lazarus just because they gave him a bed and somewhere to stay.

The Bible makes it really clear that he loves us with the same passion. It's the Super Bowl tonight. And you'll almost certainly see someone in the crowd holding up one verse that will just say, John 3, 16, which says, God so loved.

And the word for love? Agape. God so loved the world. He so loved every one of us.

Young and old. Jew and Gentile. Rich and poor. Black and white. Straight and gay.

Jesus loves us all with the same merciful love. And if we're his followers, he calls us to do the same.

[ 31 : 39 ] And although he loves the whole world, he also loves each one of us personally. Just as personally as he did Mary and Martha. The Bible says he, you know, if he knew Mary and Martha and Lazarus as they were growing up, the Bible says he knew you way before that.

In the Psalms it said, I saw you when you were knitted together in your mother's womb. He's followed you every day of your life. He knows how many hairs are on your head.

More impressive for some than others may be. And his love, just like in all the stories that we've heard, it understands our doubts, just like he understood it with Thomas.

He understands our true needs, just like he did with that Samaritan woman by the well. And he understands our failings, just like he did with Zacchaeus.

And he loves us anyway. And if we're honest, sometimes his love might confuse us. Becoming a follower of Jesus doesn't mean things will be plain sailing.

[ 32 : 48 ] Far from it sometimes. I often think of, sometimes my life feels like that period between when Mary and Martha called Jesus.

And when he actually arrived. You live in that tense period where all your prayers aren't answered. It was probably a week for Mary and Martha.

Much longer, I'm sure, for some of you. But like them, we might need just to trust God. We might never understand why things go wrong in this life.

Why you get that diagnosis. Why you still have that illness. But you know God could take away. When you lose your job. When you can't pay the bill.

When you're rejected or misunderstood. When God won't give you that one good thing that your heart desires that other people seem to have.

[ 33 : 47 ] It can be really hard. But God calls us to let our knowledge, our understanding of his love for us, change how we look at our circumstances.

Not let our circumstances influence what we think about his love for us. And ultimately, just like for Lazarus, his greatest desire is to bring us life.

Quick spoiler for you. Hopefully, Lazarus dies again. And all of us will die. But Jesus said he came to bring us life.

That John 10.10 verse I love. I've come that you might have life. And have it now, today. And go on in eternity. And ultimately, we're all like Lazarus.

Dead in our sin. And God wants to bring us alive. Just like Lazarus, we can't heal ourselves. Just like Lazarus, no one around us can heal us.

[ 34 : 52 ] But just like with Mary and Martha, Jesus might ask us, do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life?

And just like Martha said, even now. It doesn't matter what you've been through. It doesn't matter what you're going through. God has an even now love for every one of us.

And that's what he wants us to experience today. So let's just bow our heads and close in prayer. Let's just let God remind us of some things.

Father, I thank you that you love us with a different love. And I pray that today, each one of us will know that we are loved by you.

We'll know that you know and understand all of our problems. All of our failings and all of our disappointments. May we know that you love to teach us and also to comfort us.

[ 36 : 08 ] May each one of us know that your deepest desire is to bring us life now and forevermore. Amen.