

Jesus, Giver of Resurrection Life

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Please be seated. Well, apparently, Templestowe Cemetery is full.

I was there for a service a couple of weeks ago, and that was for interring ashes, but unless you've already booked a burial site, I believe that it's full, and I think perhaps the same is true of Box Hill Cemetery and no doubt other sort of suburban or inner city cemeteries.

Why is it full? It's not simply bad planning or it's too small or it's too old. The reason really why it's full is that when people die, they stay dead.

You see, dead people don't vacate the graves. They don't have to check out by 10am the next day, like if it was a hotel, for example. Dead people stay dead.

And for all of our modern technology, for all of our advances in medicine, for all our great specialists and advances in curing incurable diseases, for all our life-saving techniques that we have, for all our warnings that are so abundant about dangerous places and practices, for all our increased OH&S; standards in workplaces and at home, for all our warnings about speed limits and drink driving, for all our research into cancer, for all our pink ribbons, blue ribbons, daffodils, rainbows, red ribbons and every other colour that you can imagine, death remains final.

[1 : 38] Death remains final. Inevitable. Frequently tragic. Very often terrible. More often than not, despairing.

despite all of the advances, how fragile human life is, whether it's in Mumbai or a park in Northcote, whether you're in Zimbabwe or the ICU unit of the Alfred Hospital.

One of our church members this week, Peg Stormont, was told on Tuesday they could do nothing more for her cancer that was diagnosed six months ago. 36 hours later, she died, aged 87.

On Monday, aged 23, the son of a clergy person in this diocese, a former CMS missionary, died from cancer, diagnosed six months ago.

A marathon runner, a disturbed teenager, a backpacker in Dubrovnik, at home or away, human life is very fragile and death is inevitable, tragic and terrible and almost without exception accompanied by tears.

[3 : 13] Tears of grief, despair, tragedy, anger, futility.

Because death remains so final, so full of finality, an irrevocable sentence. In this passage in John, Jesus' attitude to death is complex, I guess.

On the one hand, his attitude to it is fairly laid back when he's told that Lazarus, his friend is ill, Jesus seems unperturbed.

They come and give him the message. There is clearly a sense of importance and urgency. This is not a brief head cold. We're not sure what the illness is, but it must have been important for them to travel at least a day's walk to Jesus to tell him.

But Jesus' attitude is to wait another couple of days. And it seems clear that then Jesus knows that Lazarus has died and then, only then, he returns to where he was.

[4 : 27] In fact, to the disciples, he says that Lazarus, our friend, has fallen asleep. It's as though Jesus is fairly lightweight, dismissive almost of death. It's sleep. The disciples, of course, are confused.

They say, well, if he's asleep, he'll be all right. And he says, well, I'm going to go and wake him up. And then he has to tell them fairly bluntly, Lazarus is dead in verse 15.

And yet, when Jesus gets there, back to where Lazarus and his family were, Jesus' attitude seems a bit different. He doesn't treat death lightly, but rather is deeply moved.

That famous verse, perhaps the shortest verse in the Bible, depending on your translation and language, Jesus wept in verse 35. Clearly, he's moved in his own grief because this was a friend.

But there's more than that. In verse 33, we're told, when Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

[5 : 38] The same comes in verse 38, a few verses later. Jesus again, greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. The word that's used there doesn't simply mean deep grief.

The word actually, inevitably, is associated with anger. The word that has got the sense of snorting in anger, if you can imagine an angry horse, it might snort in anger at something.

Jesus is grieved but angry at the same time. There's a depth to this anger that Jesus is reflecting here. Why is he so angry when we know that the power of healing that Jesus has already exercised in this and other Gospels, he could have healed Lazarus even from the distance where he was across the river.

Why then is he so angry when he could have prevented it? Why is he so angry when he didn't need to delay and he could have gone back straight away?

Why is he then so angry? Notice first the motivation for Jesus' return to see Lazarus' family. The first motivation is for the glory of God.

[6 : 54] So Jesus says, having heard the message that Lazarus is ill, Jesus says at the end of verse 4, this illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God's glory so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

It's the same motivation if you remember that we saw last week in chapter 9 with the man born blind. The disciples ask who sinned, this man or his parents, that he's born blind? And Jesus says, neither this man nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

And that's in effect the same thing here. The cause of the illness isn't the issue. Its purpose is for the glory of God. And frequently that's the case in the scriptures.

Frequently the trials, illnesses and catastrophes of life are there for the purpose of revealing and people knowing the glory of God.

It's worth thinking about that when our own life might be thrown upside down. When we're faced with bereavement or sickness or unemployment or some form of trial, how can I bring God glory through this circumstance?

[8 : 19] how will God's glory be manifest to me and to others in this situation? That's the sort of question we ought to be asking whenever we face some form of trial or difficulty of whatever sort.

But secondly, the other motivation for Jesus is love. We're told that the messengers tell him not that Lazarus is ill but Lord he whom you love is ill.

Clearly it's Lazarus. And then having said that this is for the glory of God we're then told in verse 5 and 6 accordingly though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus after having heard that Lazarus was ill he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Now this translation suggests a slight contrast though Jesus loved them he stayed but actually it's a bit more synergy between the two not a contrast.

Jesus loved them and therefore accordingly he stayed two days longer. Now that might send a puzzle through our heads when we think about that. We might think that if Jesus loved Lazarus Mary and Martha that he would have stopped the illness before death.

[9 : 36] We might think that if Jesus really loved them he would have packed his bags and run back with the messengers on the fastest camel that he could get. We might think that Jesus would seek to heal him to save the pain if he really loved them.

But no Jesus loves Mary, Martha and Lazarus therefore he waits. Lazarus dies. Indeed it looks in the timing that Lazarus would have been dead anyway.

A day's journey at least to get to Jesus by the time Jesus waits two days and travels back a day at least Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. But why does love wait here?

Love waits so that the glory of God will be seen. So that Mary, Martha, Lazarus, their neighbours, friends and family and Jews who come to console them will see the glory of God.

Love waits so that his own disciples will believe and those around will believe and see the glory of God. You see, love doesn't just deliver what another person wants quickly to ease their pain.

[10 : 55] Love has a higher goal to reveal the glory of God. That's the greatest love which we can demonstrate for another person is to direct them to the glory of God even in the midst of pain or grief or suffering.

Love is often used as an excuse for all sorts of things these days. Love is the excuse that may be given in cases of adultery, divorce, murder, theft, euthanasia, abortion.

Virtually any sin can be excused by the term love. But the Bible is always anchoring love concretely.

It doesn't leave us to redefine it. And here too, Jesus' love means he wants them to see the glory of God.

That of course comes with pain and grief because Lazarus is ill, he dies and is buried. But there is a greater glory that Jesus is directing them to because he loves them.

[12 : 16] Lazarus died in Bethany, two miles or three kilometres from Jerusalem, slightly over the Mount of Olives heading towards the Dead Sea. Not all that far. Seems that Jesus probably stayed here.

in the last week of his life on earth, travelling into Jerusalem and back each day. Not all that far to walk. Jesus though is across the Jordan when this episode begins.

Possibly even at a place there called Bethany over the Jordan where John had been baptising. Why is Jesus there? Because in the previous chapter after speaking about being the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, the Jews want to pick up stones ready to stone him.

claiming that he's blaspheming. Not the first time of course that the Jews are out to kill Jesus. But after that episode Jesus goes across the Jordan out of Judea which is under Roman rule but governed largely at least in Jewish society by the high priests and Sanhedrin to Perea on the other side of the Jordan River.

In a sense politically safe place. That's why Jesus is there because of the threats on his life. And when we understand what Jesus does for Lazarus we cannot underestimate the danger with which Jesus was faced coming back to bring Lazarus from the grave.

[13 : 41] Back in chapter 5 we saw three weeks ago the Jews are ready to kill Jesus because he broke the Sabbath and called God his own father and they were seeking all the more to kill him.

the theme gets repeated at the end of chapter 8 when they recognise that Jesus in their terms is blaspheming. It's there again as I just said at the end of chapter 10 just before this passage.

Clearly there is now a concerted effort to put Jesus to death. So when Jesus says to the disciples in verse 8 or verse 7 let us go to Judea again the disciples respond in verse 8 saying Rabbi the Jews were just now trying to stone you and are you going there again?

And of course when they do set out Thomas says with a sort of fake bravado I guess well let us also go that we may die with him in verse 16.

The fear was not misplaced because at the end of chapter 11 beyond today's passage after raising Lazarus the Jewish leaders meet and deliberate to put Jesus to death in verses 47 to 50.

[14 : 57] By the end of this chapter the path to the cross is clear. Jesus is under sentence of death in effect. But this contrast with what Jesus does for Lazarus.

Jesus came to give Lazarus life from death death. But he did so in the face of a very real threat that his own life was in danger of death and indeed ultimately of course he is put to death.

That is there's a contrast. Jesus came to bring Lazarus from death to life at the same time risking his own life that he may be put to death and ultimately is.

It foreshadows of course the death of Jesus. That is there's this shadow over this whole passage that Jesus' life is seriously at risk and ultimately of course he dies.

He dies to give life and that's being foreshadowed here with a threat over Jesus' life as he brings Lazarus back to life. It foreshadows in fact the great exchange of the gospel that Jesus gives up his life so that we may live.

[16 : 19] The great substitution of Jesus' death for us at the heart of the Christian faith. At this stage it's just a foreshadowing but it's a clear contrast with Jesus' own life at stake.

Lazarus is dead, buried four days by the time Jesus arrives, probably buried the same day that he dies. Buried in his tomb, a corpse beginning to rot.

Apparently in those days in primitive society you would decompose much more quickly than we do because so many of our foods have preservatives in them. It was a hot society as well.

So when Mary and Martha say well there's already a stench, they're probably right after just four days. He would have been covered in spices and ointments and wrapped in a cloth of course but even so the stench would be there after just such a short time.

A body that's rotting, a body that's already decomposing, a body that's dead. When Jesus gets there Martha firstly confronts Jesus and says to him in verse 21 that if Jesus had already been there my brother she says would not have died but even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.

[17 : 47] There could be perhaps a mild rebuke, Jesus if you'd been here but maybe not. It seems really from Martha a simple statement of faith, Jesus if you'd been here we know that you could have healed him.

Mary similarly in verse 32 she says to Jesus when she meets him Lord if you'd been here my brother would not have died and the people gathered around in verse 37 say could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man whom we saw last week chapter 9 have kept this man from dying.

They all acknowledge Jesus power to heal and maybe with the exception of Martha firstly they think therefore it's too late. Power to heal is one thing but he's dead now, dead four days, a rotting corpse.

Martha's words to Jesus though lead to his response your brother will rise again in verse 23. Martha said to him in response I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

It's a great statement of faith. In the Old Testament the belief in the resurrection is relatively embryonic. There's little glimpses of it for example in the prophecy of Daniel. By the time of Jesus' day there was a firm belief amongst Jews and certainly the Old Testament's consistent with the view that after death a believer would somehow still be in the presence of God in Sheol at least.

[19 : 20] But by the time of Jesus the dominant view was a firm belief in the resurrection from the dead with the exception of course of the Sadducees group that vehemently opposed that. Martha's statement is a great statement of faith.

A statement that Jesus could have healed. A statement that Lazarus will rise on the last day. But that then brings the extraordinary claim of Jesus.

Famous and bold. I am the resurrection and the life. A statement with the full force of divine authority.

I am the resurrection and the life. As we saw two weeks ago when Jesus says I am the light of the world, he's echoing here the name of God, Jehovah, Yahweh in the Old Testament.

I am who I am. Jesus is claiming here to be divine, claiming an authority of divinity. I am personally, me, the resurrection and the life.

[20 : 27] Notice how it all hinges on Jesus. 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. Not a general theological belief, not a belief in the God up in the heavens, but focusing and hinging on Jesus.

Me, I am the resurrection of the life. Do you believe in me? Is what he's saying. It's breathtaking and it's boldness, this claim of Jesus.

He's claiming power over death that nobody else has. When Elijah brings back to life the dead boy in the first reading in 1 Kings 17, he prays to God to do it.

He doesn't do it. Jesus is claiming here a personal authority that no human being has ever exercised, even if some perhaps have tried to claim it. What Jesus is saying is that death, the final enemy, is underneath me.

[21 : 34] I have authority over death and therefore the devil who holds the power of death, as the writer to the Hebrews expresses it, is under me as well. I, Jesus, have authority for resurrection and life and that means over death.

Jesus is boasting a vast power when he says, I am the resurrection and the life. So why then is Jesus so angry, deeply troubled and disturbed in verses 33 and 38?

Not because Lazarus is his friend. He's not angry that Mary and Martha are grieving, but he's angry because death is the instrument of evil.

Death is the consequence of evil and sin. Death was never part of God's design for this creation. Death was the devil's design, not God's.

Death is Satan's violent tyranny, said Calvin. Death is the manifestation of evil at work. And that's why Jesus is angry.

[22 : 43] Not because simply Lazarus is dead or his friends are grieving, but because death is so terrible, so awful, so final, so evil.

Jesus goes to the tomb and demands that the stone be rolled from it. No doubt a tomb cut into the ground like a little cave.

We're not sure how big this was, but typically they would have one, three, five, six or seven even big places where bodies could be laid. After a year or two, the bones of a skeleton would then be put into a box about this long, the longest bone in the human body called an ossuary and therefore able to be stacked up somewhere else and the grave sites reused for other people.

Maybe Templestowe Cemetery should think of that sort of thing. He's told then as he comes to the tomb and asks for the stone to be taken away, Lord, already there is a stench because he's been dead four days.

And Jesus said to Martha, did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God? That's why he delayed of course.

[23 : 55] Out of love. So the glory of God would be revealed as we saw at the beginning of this passage. Jesus is saying the glory of God is about to be revealed.

Presumably he's not told them that he's about to raise him from death. Presumably they think this is a sort of macabre grief of opening up the grave to go in and see the body wrapped in its cloth or something like that.

But before he does anything else, Jesus prays, he does not pray for God to raise Lazarus. That is, he does not pray along the lines of Elijah's prayer that we heard in the first reading in 1 Kings 17.

God bring back life to this boy or something to that effect. But rather he prays for the benefit of the onlookers. He prays, Father, I thank you for having heard me.

I knew that you always hear me, but I've said this for the sake of the crowd standing here so that they may believe that you sent me. That's the glory of God being revealed. That they may know that you have sent me, that Jesus is sent by God, the Son of God, the Messiah, indeed as Martha confessed earlier on.

[25 : 06] So often in the Bible we get in effect that statement and purpose. When Elijah is on Mount Carmel, he doesn't simply pray that God will come down and consume the sacrifice, that's covered in water.

He prays that the people will know that God is the one who's done it and that he is God's servant. And so often in the scriptures something happens, it's not simply the event, but the real purpose is that the people who experience or see the event know that it is God behind it.

When I pray with people who are sick, I will often not just pray for their healing, but pray that they will know that God has brought them healing or God has been with them. That's what matters most actually, because so often of course our world will see something that God does like sending rain and think, oh, it's a lucky day and not acknowledge God the giver.

That is, we should be praying not simply for rain, but that when rain comes, people know that it's God who's provided it. That's a biblical way of praying and that's what Jesus is praying here.

He's praying in effect that when Lazarus comes out of the tomb yet to happen, yet to be announced, the people will not just jump up and down and say, oh, Lazarus, here, it's great to see you and sit down, but they will know that it is God who sent Jesus, that it is God's glory that they have just seen.

[26 : 27] That's what he prays. He doesn't pray that God will do it because Jesus has authority himself to raise Lazarus from the grave. And that, of course, is what he's about to do.

Lazarus, come out. And Lazarus came out alive.

The rotting corpse in an instant, in a twinkling of an eye, come back to life. Just like he'd healed people earlier, the lame man for 38 years, instantly dead limbs alive again.

Lazarus came out. The sheep hearing the voice of the good shepherd. He speaks and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive.

Imagine if Jesus had simply said, come out. There'd be Lazarus, there'd be somebody up here in the cemetery. In fact, the cemetery might begin to be emptied if they were the sheep of the good shepherd.

[27 : 39] Lazarus, come out. The good shepherd knows his sheep by name. And they know his voice.

Remember what Jesus had said back in chapter 5, which we saw three weeks ago. Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

When Lazarus will hear the voice of the Son of God and hear and live. What an escalation of power Jesus is showing.

All through John's gospel, very clearly, Jesus is the one with the authority over life. As announced in the opening prologue, in him was life and the life was the light of men.

He promises new birth, new life in effect to Nicodemus in chapter 3. He promises life-giving water to the woman at the well in chapter 4.

[28 : 43] He gives life to the dead limbs of the lame man in chapter 5 at Bethesda Pool. He gives the bread of life, or speaks of it, to the hungry crowd that he feeds in chapter 6.

He says, I am the light of the world and if you walk in my light, you will live in chapter 8. Sight to the blind man in chapter 9. I've come to give abundant life, he says, in chapter 10.

And now, maybe climactically, but not in fact, life to Lazarus from the grave. You see, friends, this is not the climax. This is not all there is.

This is still a prototype, a sketch model, a sign of something greater to come. And greater is, of course, to come. The greatest is not Jesus saying, Lazarus, come forth.

Lazarus is raised to die again another day. But the day is coming when someone else will exit a grave. alive, never to die again. The Lord Jesus himself and his own resurrection.

[29 : 46] But even that, in a sense, is not all. Because Jesus also said in John chapter 5, not only the day is coming and is now here when the dead will hear his voice and live.

He said, do not be astonished at this, for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out. What a day that day will be.

The day when the Lord Jesus, alive, living, still alive, comes back again in glory. What a day that will be when he comes to the graves of his sheep and calls them out.

By name. Not like Lazarus to rise but again to die another day. But to rise to glory.

When he'll come and say, Bill, come out. Ian, come out. Elizabeth, come out. And when he'll say that of Jack, come out.

[30 : 52] Of those whom we've loved, who are now dead in the Lord, come out. Jenny, come out. Bill, come out. Norma, come out.

Peg, come out. Ben, come out. And we'll hear our name. And we'll come out. We'll come out changed.

No longer clothed with mortality but immortality. No longer clothed with perishability but with imperishability. Changed and perfected into the likeness and glory of Jesus himself.

Changed in a moment, in a twinkling, at the last trumpet. And we will rise to glory. To a kingdom that has no tears, no crying, no pain because it has no sin or evil and the devil is gone finally and once and for all.

We'll rise to the heavenly, glorious, perfect and eternal kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ when he comes in glory and calls us out. To a kingdom where there is no need for sun or moon or stars because the light of God himself is the lighting up that kingdom and the lamp is the Lamb, Jesus, the light of the world.

[32 : 01] What a glorious day. And that's where we're heading, my brothers and sisters in Christ. To the day when the risen Lord Jesus will come again and call to himself and to his kingdom everyone who's trusted in him and we will rise glorious, triumphant and perfected on that great and final day.

And that, of course, is why he came in the first place. Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace, hail the Son of Righteousness, light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.

Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king. Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. And everyone who believes in me, will never die.

[33 : 26] Do you believe this? He asked Martha. Do you believe this? Do you believe this?