

The Subject We Never Talk About

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Preacher: Adrian Lane

[0 : 00] This is the AM service on the 20th of September 1998.

The preacher is Adrian Lane. His subject is the subject we never talk about and is from John chapter 11 verses 1 to 45.

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you speak to us through the Bible and we pray now that as we look at the Bible, you would open our minds and soften our hearts and give us the courage to respond to what you're saying to us this morning.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you.

We had the place full of people from various, all sorts of places all over the world for our international night. Over the week, there's been a wide range of events where we've tried to explain the Christian message and where we've spoken about how Jesus has changed us and given us fresh hope.

[1 : 38] And today I want to speak about a tough subject that I mentioned last week, a subject that some of us prefer never to think about at all, a subject that some of us think about all the time and that's the subject of death.

Death's often in the news, isn't it? When that Swiss Air plane went down the other day off Nova Scotia, I felt sick really for a few days afterwards.

I have a lot of friends in Switzerland and I'm actually a member of the Swiss Air Frequent Flyer Club. And that route from the UK, the US to Europe, I've flown many times and just in July I was flying over much the same area.

Death is so unpredictable, isn't it? I don't know if you read on the news or heard Mark Ross say, he's Switzerland's top tennis player. And he was scheduled to board that flight after losing at the US Open.

And at the very last moment, he decided to stay in New York for another night. And he said in a wonderful French accent that I won't try to imitate, he said, you change your mind and you wake up a few hours later and discover you've saved your life.

[3 : 01] On the other hand, another man was bumped off two other flights that night before he got a seat, no doubt thinking that he was very lucky and very relieved.

But he had joined the flight that would never land. Death is so unpredictable, isn't it? And yet, on the other hand, death is very predictable.

I mean, we all know we're going to die. And I'm often surprised at how little preparation many people make for death.

I mean, despite death being in the news, I wonder how many of us have made appropriate preparation as a result. I wonder if there was a flurry of willmaking after Lady Diana died, for instance.

I doubt it. And I can't help but wonder how prepared each of us are for death. And I don't just mean in terms of writing a will or organising our affairs or putting the kids' names on the pictures.

[4 : 06] I mean, how prepared are we spiritually for death? And this incident that was read for us in the dramatic reading from John 11, from Jesus' life, is a great help to our thinking about death.

It's an event that happened a long time ago, 2,000 years ago, but it's very pertinent. And Jesus was teaching at this time in the area around present-day Jordan and Israel.

And the first thing that strikes me in this account is the seeming incomprehensibility of Jesus' actions in the face of impending death. You just can't understand what Jesus is doing.

A friend of Jesus called Lazarus is sick, really sick, on the point of death. So his sisters send word up country to Jesus to come back down.

And what does Jesus do? He stays where he is two more days. Then he says to his disciples, let's go back down there.

[5 : 19] Now, Lazarus lived in a little town called Bethany, which was just outside Jerusalem. And last time Jesus had been to Jerusalem, the religious leaders there had tried to stone him because he had been claiming, in their words, to be God.

And so when Jesus says he wants to go back down to Bethany, his followers naturally protest. They say, are you an idiot? We can't go back to that hornet's nest. They'll kill you. But Jesus is determined to go.

And so in the end, Thomas says, okay, we might as well go. At least we'll all die together. But aren't Jesus' actions incomprehensible? I mean, can you imagine being Mary or Martha and thinking how impatient you'd be as you watch Lazarus, your brother, get sicker and sicker, moving closer and closer to death and wondering where your friend Jesus is, the miracle worker?

He still hasn't arrived. Doesn't he care about us? After all the meals we've provided for him, after all the sleeps he's had in our house, why hasn't he come?

And can you imagine Jesus' followers' confusion? When Jesus gets the message, he decides to stay put.

[6 : 38] But now he wants to go back down there. What is Jesus on about? Now we know in our heads, the end of the story, because we've had it read to us, that Lazarus will be brought back to life.

But Mary and Martha don't know that. Their world's falling to pieces. We know in our heads that Jesus knows exactly what he's doing, that he's waiting for Lazarus to be well and truly dead, so that a bigger truth can be learnt, so that in the end, Jesus' total power over death will be plainly seen.

But to Jesus' followers, his actions seem totally inconsistent, even cruel. And so Jesus' own pain, when he hears about his friend Lazarus' terminal illness, is only made all the more painful by the fact that he knows his followers are confused and questioning.

And Jesus' own pain is only made all the more painful by knowing that his friends Mary and Martha will be frustrated and impatient and upset, thinking that he doesn't care.

And Jesus' own pain is only made all the more painful knowing that Lazarus is suffering at the point of death, waiting for his friend Jesus to come, his only hope.

[8 : 13] And in our pain and confusion, we too may ask, what is Jesus doing? Where is he? What's going on? And Jesus' actions, or lack of actions, may seem totally incomprehensible to us.

But this incident shows us, and the rest of the Bible fills it out, that Jesus does know how we're feeling, that he does love his friends, and that he has promised to work all things for good for those who love him.

But his ways are often not our ways. And often we don't know the bigger picture. We don't know all the facts or understand what's going on. And in those circumstances, all we can do is trust.

But I jump ahead of myself. Because in the next section, we see Jesus' pain and anger at death. When he finally arrives at Bethany, Jesus finds that Lazarus has been dead, in fact, four days.

Martha goes out to meet Jesus, and says, no doubt hardly hiding her frustration, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died. And after a brief conversation with Jesus, she goes back to get her sister Mary.

[9 : 39] Mary comes out too, followed by her friends, and they're all crying. And Mary falls at Jesus' feet and says, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

The same thing as a sister. And Jesus, in response, is deeply moved and upset and cries himself. They all go on out to the tomb, and again, Jesus is deeply moved and upset.

No doubt he's angry and upset at seeing the pain and the awfulness of death. Because death was never meant to be.

When God made this beautiful world with all the plants and the flowers in it, people were able to enjoy God and all that he'd made continuously. But because of our own self-centeredness, because we wanted to do our own thing, without God, death came into the world.

These days, some people want to turn death into some kind of friend or just a stop on a journey or even some kind of new experience. But no, death is an enemy.

[10 : 52] Death is ugly and was never part of God's original plan. Of course, in this world, it may bring some relief and some physical relief.

But it may, in fact, be the door not to relief and release but to something far worse. You see, to say that death just brings relief is such a materialistic and small-minded view of this world, isn't it?

It presumes that this world is only made up of what we can see and feel and measure. or it presumes that if there is a spiritual world that that spiritual world is universally pleasant.

But what blindness, what naivety, you only have to have travelled a little bit around the world and been involved in a few experiences to know that the spiritual world can be mighty ugly and very fearful.

And yes, death will be the door for some not into relief but into greater suffering and torment. The Bible's very clear about that.

[12 : 02] People are right to fear and hate death. They are right to be angry at death because death was never meant to be. And here, Jesus too is angry and deeply disturbed.

But thankfully, our story doesn't end there because when Jesus gets to the tomb, he orders a stone to be removed.

Take away the stone, he says. Oh, but Lord, says Martha, by this time there'll be a stench. He's been dead four days. How gracious she is and how sensible.

She doesn't want the corpse of her brother disturbed. He's dead now. It's all over. It's so inappropriate and it would be inappropriate if anyone else was saying that but Jesus.

But aren't Jesus' actions preposterous? Imagine if we were beside that island where Lady Di is buried with all those flowers on top of it and somebody said, dig up the grave.

[13 : 07] that's what Jesus is doing. And when the stone is removed, Jesus calls out to Lazarus, come out.

And the dead man comes out bound in strips of linen and with a cloth wrapped around his face. Isn't that amazing?

What could you say to that? Imagine being one of Jesus' followers trying to go to sleep and lying in bed at that night. What would you be thinking?

What is going on? Who am I hanging around with? Who is this man? Maybe even having some self-censure at not trusting him at the beginning.

Can you imagine being Mary and Martha? Shock would be how I describe it. I mean, here we have a home where sickness and death have been and it would show all the consequences of that, wouldn't it?

[14 : 11] There'd be flowers in every corner, every vase filled if it was in our society. If it was in our society, perhaps there'd be a few casseroles in the fridge brought by faithful friends. There'd be cards all over the place, carefully chosen and very thoughtfully worded, sorry to hear about Lazarus.

The place would be tidy, the washing up done, you know how it is when we're grieving, we like to clean up and be busy, but the gas bills and the Maya catalogues would no doubt just be on the side there in a pile for another day.

And Lazarus' room would probably be untouched. And back into this home walks Lazarus and sees all these cards and sees all these remembrance of death.

And now he's asleep next door quietly snoring. And you're thinking, did this really happen?

And maybe if he stopped snoring you'd sort of want to rush in and just check that you weren't dreaming. And over the way or upstairs perhaps Jesus is also sleeping. he is a person.

[15 : 26] I mean we fed him tonight but he's no ordinary person. I mean what person can raise people from the dead? And even in your shock filled joy perhaps you'd be asking why on earth did all this have to happen?

why couldn't Jesus have just come when we called him to save us all the trouble? But then you might realise that all this is part of something bigger, much bigger.

Sure Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary and Martha and wanted to help them but this miracle wasn't just for them. it was for those all around about, it was for you and for me, it was for the whole world.

Because in this miracle we learn two amazing and wonderful truths. We learn that death need not be forever. There can be resurrection.

All our grief and concern over death need not stay there. Death need not be the end. And the other great truth we learn is that resurrection comes through Jesus.

[16 : 39] Lazarus' resurrection is a sign you might say or a picture of Jesus' own death and burial and resurrection which comes just a short while after this miracle.

And just as Lazarus was well and truly dead and buried, so was Jesus. And just as Lazarus was raised from the dead, so was Jesus.

And just as Jesus was raised from the dead, so will all those who have put their trust in Jesus and become one of his followers.

Indeed, there can be no resurrection without Jesus. Jesus has the power over life and death and he's proved it. Because do you remember that short conversation that he had with Martha when he first saw her on the road?

Just what was in that conversation? salvation. He said, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will never die.

[17 : 52] Do you believe that? you see, when Jesus himself died, the perfect one on the cross, he paid the penalty for all the wrong things that you and I had done, had ever done.

He'd taken the penalty and that penalty is death. And that penalty's been paid fully. That's why Jesus didn't stay dead.

That's why he rose. The cross is empty. Because the penalty's been paid. And so I ask you again the question I asked at the beginning, how prepared are you for death?

Do you have confidence that you'll be raised? Because there is one and only one way to be certain of resurrection and that is to join up with Jesus like one of those first followers.

So that all that Jesus has done is counted for you. So that just as Jesus now lives, you too will live when your life on this earth comes to an end.

[19 : 10] friends, over the last week, various people at various functions have been blaming the message and I know that a number of you here have been thinking about this message for some time.

And I want to give you an opportunity to become a Christian if you're not already a Christian. Become one of Jesus' followers. I'd be surprised if there weren't a number here this morning who would like to do so.

But if you're still not sure, can I suggest that you set yourself a time limit, a month or two, say, to find out more, ask your questions and then make a decision.

Because if you're anything like me, you keep putting off the most important decisions in life. For those of you who would like to become a follower of Jesus today, it's one of the simplest things to do, although it might be the hardest.

thing to do. You can do that by talking to Jesus, by praying. And what I'm going to do is I'm going to say a prayer and I'm going to invite you to say that prayer after me in your head.

[20 : 20] Let me tell you what I'm going to say so that you can make up your own mind as to whether or not you want to join in. Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus to go through death.

Pay my penalty and give me resurrected life forever. Forgive me for not following Jesus and for living life my own way.

Help me to follow Jesus here on earth knowing that I will be with him when I die. Would you like to pray that prayer today?

Why don't we all bow our heads and if you'd like to pray that prayer with me, just follow, say it in your head after I say it. Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus to go through death.

Pay my penalty and give me resurrected life forever. Forgive me for not following Jesus and for living life my own way.

[21 : 35] Help me to follow Jesus here on earth knowing that I will be with him when I die. Amen. again. I hope you are going to hear much let me Thank you.