

Giving Life to the Dead

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 13th of February 2000.

The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled Giving Life to the Dead and is from John chapter 11 verses 1 to 44.

Father, I pray that you would open our hearts and our minds to help us understand your word and to know what it means for you to be the resurrection and the life. Amen.

On June 8, 1992, the eve of my grandfather's 87th birthday, I received a telephone call from Sydney, which is where he lived, to say that he had died a half an hour or so before the occasion. And it came as a bit of a shock to me and it came also at a very busy time in my life. As I had to prepare essays, I had to finish an essay for Paul on John chapter 4 in fact, and I had to complete an exam, I had to get prepared for exams as it was coming up to the end of the first semester at college, Ridley College. So it came at a very busy time.

But I was very close to Grandpa and there was no other thought in my mind other than to head back to Sydney to mourn and grieve with the rest of my family. The next day, we drove to Sydney. I got an extension of my biblical Greek essay. The next day, we all gathered together in Sydney as a family. My mother and father were on a boat in the middle of the Whitsundays and they came back down the next day as well. They got to shore, got on a plane and came back to Sydney. And we were all able to gather together as a family to say goodbye to Grandpa in an appropriate way. Well, with the death of someone that you were close to, you do your best to be there at the end or at their funeral at the very least, don't you? It helps us, I think, to grieve. It helps the mourning process and so on. And it helps us to bring about closure on that person's life. Well, this reaction by Jesus to the message sent by Mary and Martha telling him that their brother Lazarus, I think, is an unusual one. That their brother Lazarus is ill is an unusual response by Jesus. You'd think that he would want to go and be with him, with Lazarus in his illness, rather than deliberately stay away from him.

[2 : 5 7] See, twice in this passage, John chapter 11, we are told of the friendship that Jesus and Lazarus had. And it was a healthy friendship. And it seems that there was a strong bond between the two of them. So why doesn't Jesus go to Bethany straight away? Why does he stay on an extra two days in the place that he was? When my grandfather died, we left for Sydney as soon as we could. We didn't delay it. But here we see, we read that Jesus waits two days before going. Let me offer you a couple of reasons for his delay. He had to travel to Bethany, which was in the region of Judea, and only a couple of miles out of Jerusalem. He had to go to Bethany, which is where Lazarus was. Now, last week, at the end of chapter 10, we read that

Jesus escapes from the Jews who had tried to arrest him in Jerusalem for supposedly blaspheming. So Jesus got out of that region of Judea. And he would risk his own life by traveling back into this territory again, into Judea. And so that could be a possibility. And certainly, the disciples see it that way, as we will see in just a few moments. But the reason that Jesus delays his trip to Bethany is seen in verse 4. Knowing that this Lazarus is gravely ill, Jesus says this, this illness does not lead to death. Rather, it is for God's glory so that the Son of Man may be glorified through it. Jesus' sole purpose in delaying is to glorify God. And now we're told the Son of God, that is Jesus, through what will happen over the next few days. Jesus just wants to honor God and bring glory to him. So this illness of Lazarus provides a platform in order that the glory of God might be displayed in his life.

Now, often as Christians, I think that we go through some pretty testing times, whether it's ridicule from non-Christians, having to say no to a party that you may be invited to because you know that what is going to go on there, you know that there's going to be drug use or excessive alcohol use and other such inappropriate behavior.

That's one sort of testing time that we might go through. It could be a personal trial or a physical illness. And whatever the trial is, when it comes our way, how do we handle it?

Do we complain or do we grumble? Is that all we do with it? Do we have a tendency to try and blame God? Or do you see your problems as opportunities to honor God?

[6 : 07] Johnny Erickson, who is a Christian writer and a paraplegic sufferer, sees her condition as a means to honor God. She writes in a book called *A Step Further*, I do not care if I am confined to this wheelchair, provided from it I can bring glory to God.

While this high claim of Johnny's may seem daunting to us, and I'm sure that she probably has some very down days about being a paraplegic and so on, we can all make a beginning in our present sufferings, whatever they may be, by offering them consciously to God for his using.

We need to seek to glorify God in the things that we do. Well, Jesus waits for two days before heading down to Bethany to see Lazarus.

And the fear of the disciples is seen in verse 8. They say, Rabbi, which means teacher, the Jews were just now trying to stone you. And are you going there again? These disciples have good intentions, but it seems that they still do not understand who this Jesus is.

They've been traveling with him for quite some time now, and they still do not understand who he is. Now in the story, the fairy tale of Cinderella, she had to leave the palace ball before midnight, because at midnight, what would happen? She would return into her raggy clothes and so on.

[7 : 48] Her stagecoach would turn into a pumpkin, and the men, I think, would turn back into mice or something like that. But until the clock struck midnight, she was free to dance and roam the palace with her prince charming, with the dance the night away, so to speak.

Well, in the same way, Jesus was free to travel through Judea without fear of being stoned, because his hour had not yet come.

And this hour that Jesus talks about is a recurring theme throughout the Gospel of John, where Jesus says, his hour had not yet come.

And so it is here. The clock had not yet struck twelve. Verse 9 says, Jesus says, are there not twelve hours of daylight?

While there is still daylight, it is to be used. And Jesus' hour had not yet come. That is, the twelfth hour where he is handed over to humans and made to suffer.

[8 : 56] That's what he's referring to. But until God willed that hour to come, the only course to adopt was to go about one's mission.

And since Jesus is also the light of the world, which chapter 8 talks about, the disciples, if they keep close to this Jesus, will have light to walk by also.

Now, as the story moves on, in verse 11, we see that Jesus tells his disciples metaphorically that Lazarus has fallen asleep. Now, it's apparent as you read this passage that they think he is only asleep, like physically sleeping, which is not a bad thing if you're unwell.

Chris, you would know we all need plenty of rest if we're sick, don't we? Is that right? That's what you'd prescribe, isn't it? But Jesus tells these people plainly in verse 15 that Lazarus is dead.

So there can be no misunderstanding whatsoever when they get down to Bethany. They'll know that Lazarus is physically dead. And when they get to Bethany or near Bethany, we learn firsthand the cold facts about Lazarus' deaths.

[10 : 18] Verse 17 says, Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. In other words, this Lazarus is thoroughly dead.

He's in the tomb and so on. A widespread belief among the Jews of this time and many other people is that on the fourth day after the death, the soul finally abandons the body and passes to where good and evil are separated from each other.

So the first three days after someone has died for Jewish people is the most intense time of mourning and grief because it was believed that the dead person was in a sense still present to witness the grief of his or her family and friends.

But what does this passage tell us here? It is the fourth day. Lazarus isn't just dead. He's thoroughly and totally dead.

His spirit is supposedly gone and decomposition of the body is well and truly underway. It's not a pretty thought when you think about it, is it?

[11 : 34] Well, Jesus approaches Bethany and word gets to Martha that he's almost here. And so she immediately goes out to meet him while her sister Mary stays at home. And this is the same Mary and Martha that we read about in Luke's Gospel.

And her words when she gets to Jesus seems to be words of a rebuke. In verse 21 she says, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

She'd sent Jesus a message some days ago. And if he had been here, if Jesus had been here, if he'd come straight away, he wouldn't be in the tomb.

His body wouldn't be in the state. That it's in. But there's hope also in her words. For she says that despite her situation, despite her loss, despite the grief and the mourning that she and her friends and Mary are going through, she knows that God will do whatever Jesus asks of him.

And Jesus is able to reassure her that her brother will rise again. He gives her that assurance. But in verse 24, we see that the nature of his resurrection is understood by Martha as a resurrection which is in the future.

[12 : 56] Somewhere a long way down the track. And belief in the resurrection was a hope that was shared by many of the Jewish people. And this resurrection that they believed in would happen at the dawn of what they call the New Messianic Age where God's kingdom is established here on earth.

And this was the great hope that they knew would happen one day. It's what Martha knew would happen one day. But we, the reader, know that Jesus means Lazarus will rise again this very day.

So do these people really know who Jesus is? That is, that he's the Messiah. Well, they're about to find that out, I think. Now I can make many, many claims about myself.

You know that I am Phil Muleman. You know that I'm married to Barbara. And that I have three children and a couple of guinea, or three guinea pigs, I think. And a dog.

And you also know that I'm a, hopefully, an ordained minister in the Anglican Church. And you also know that I'm a swan supporter. And that there is no other team worth following.

[14 : 14] I can make all those sorts of claims. I cannot make the claim, however, that Jesus makes about himself here in verses 25 and 26.

He says, 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.

And when the chapter is leading up to this amazing statement, where Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life, Jesus has said to his followers some other pretty big statements.

Let me just remind you of some of them. He said, I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. In these statements and other similar statements, he offers life and hope to those who believe and trust in him completely, absolutely.

And now with this statement that he is the resurrection and the life, he fills out all these other claims in their fullest. The life that he offers is nothing less than the indestructible life of the resurrection.

[15 : 31] The very life of the deathless God himself. That is the life that Jesus offers. And he's offering this life, not sometime in the future, but he's offering it here and now.

It's available now. Martha believes in a resurrection life, which is in the distant future. But what Jesus is offering is available here and now in him, that is Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life.

So, to believe in Jesus means that death lies defeated. It means that the Messianic age has dawned.

God's kingdom is in a sense established. God's kingdom is in a sense established. Now, sure, it's true that we still have to physically die. And that can bring about dissolution for all of us who die, as well as dissolution for us as we watch a loved one die.

There's no doubt about that. I know some people whose mother died at Christmastime. And this family is a group of very strong Christians.

[16 : 48] But it was still a tremendously sad occasion. Now, the daughter said to her mother, as she held her hand in the hospital bed, that it is okay.

It's okay, mum. You can let go. You will be with the Lord, and so on. Now, they can be great words of comfort to a dying person. I've said them myself when I've been at a hospital bed with someone.

But you know what the dying mother's response was? A strong Christian? You don't know how hard it is to let go.

They were her dying words, virtually. You don't know how hard it is to let go. Even for Christians, who should be full of hope, facing up to our own physical death is a hard thing.

Believing in Jesus offers assurance and gives us confidence that we pass from this life into eternity with God. But death is still a hard thing for us to face up to because it is a foreign thing to our own experience.

[17 : 59] Sure, we may witness death, but we ourselves have never physically passed through it. So, it can be a hard thing to face up to.

Well, Martha states her belief in Jesus as the Messiah and therefore the resurrection and the life. The one who will raise up his people. And Jesus is just about to demonstrate this before many people, many of the crowds that had gathered there at the time.

And so, we read along with me in verses 28 to 33. When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, the teacher is here and is calling for you.

And when she heard it, she got up clearly and went to him. Now, Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. And the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw how Mary got up to go out.

They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. She was going to see the Lord of Life but they thought she was going to the tomb to see and grieve and mourn over her dead brother.

[19 : 16] And when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him the same words that Martha said, Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

Jesus is not remote from the suffering of his fellow humans. The fact that he is one with us in humanity means that he is one with us in agony.

And so we read on in verse 35 that Jesus began to weep. Literally that he burst into tears. One writer says, these are not tears of hired mourners or of an inwardly detached spectator.

Jesus is one with us in our need. He feels our pain. He lives our experience from the inside. His tears at that moment authentically expressed the emotion of his heart.

Jesus wept and we also see in verses 33 and verses 38 that Jesus was greatly disturbed. Not just disturbed but greatly disturbed.

[20 : 44] And the meaning of this Greek word when applied to the human emotion invariably speaks of anger. But why was he angry? Or who or what is his anger or this great distress directed?

Well to help us understand that let me read to you what one writer has said about this about this distress that Jesus is under.

The spectacle of the distress of Mary and her companions enraged Jesus because it brought poignantly home to his consciousness the evil of death.

It's unnaturalness. It's violent tyranny. In Mary's grief he sees and feels the misery of the whole race and burns with rage against the oppressor of men.

It is death that is the object of his wrath and behind death him who has the power of death and whom he had come into the world to destroy that is the devil.

[21 : 56] Tears of sympathy may fill his eyes but that is incidental. His soul is held by rage and he advances to the tomb as a champion who prepares for conflict.

Jesus is angry. He is greatly disturbed. Those who observe those who are present and see Jesus' tears think it is perhaps to do with his helplessness in the situation to be able to do anything.

Lazarus was indeed a good friend of Jesus but now he is dead and so Jesus weeps. Lazarus cannot be brought back from it.

It is gone. He has been dead for four days. So all that Jesus can offer is some caring words of sympathy. That is perhaps what the thought is that is going on in some of the people's mind and so on and they make some other comments about Jesus if he had been there.

He had raised a blind man if he had been here and so on. Well Jesus goes to this stone covered tomb in which the dead body of Lazarus lay and he tells those gathered to take away the stone rolled in front of it.

[23 : 15] Martha's response in verse 39 I think represents those of the others gathered that is that there will be a stench because of the amount of time that Lazarus has been dead.

Well Jesus goes on and he prays a prayer. He prays a prayer to God not because he needs to but in order that those gathered will see that Jesus is seeking to bring glory to God as verse 4 talks about at the beginning of this passage.

And Jesus is on about doing the work of the Father, the work of the one who has sent him into the world and he wants the focus of what's just about to happen here to be on God so that the people may know that Jesus is sent by God.

He wants all that attention focused on God. And so in his prayer we see he looks up and all those sorts of incidents that are going, he wants the attention of what's about to happen to be focused on God.

God's love. He then cried out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. Now I want us all to look at verse 44 and I want us all to read it.

[24 : 41] Jesus said in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. Let's read. the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth.

Jesus said to him, unbind him and let him go. Jesus, the Lord of life, has raised Lazarus from the dead.

Lazarus, this dead man, is again among the living. Death has been robbed of its prey because the person who is the resurrection and the life has come to save him.

And that person is God's son, Jesus Christ, who later in John 14, verse 6 says, I am the way, the truth and the life.

Jesus has raised this Lazarus from the grave. Well, Jesus himself must now go the way of the cross so that through him many may be raised to life.

[25 : 56] For it is there at the cross that the Lord of life and death, still invites the world to come to him. It's at the cross. You want to know how to have eternal life?

Look to the cross. Read John's gospel. It all points to the cross. Look to God. Death is inevitable for all of us.

But Christ has won the victory over death. and he shares that victory with all who repent, that is, that turn away from sin and believe in him as saviour and lord.

To respond to Christ's invitation is to surrender our independence. But to die in this sense is to begin to live now.

As for Jesus, so for us, death leads to resurrection. Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life.

[27 : 04] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this? Amen. Amen.