

The Raising of Lazarus - 17th October 2021

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[0 : 00] Good morning. It's great to see you and it's really lovely to be able to be here standing and sharing with you this morning. It does feel strange, you know, obviously for us it's been quite a long time for all of us. Well as you know the last few weeks we've been looking at familiar stories in the Bible from different perspectives and seeing if we can gain some sort of insight or new understanding about what those stories reveal to us. And last week Ruth explored the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian and we've got a look at what it means to be inclusive. And so today we're in the Gospel of John and it's a familiar story from John chapter 11.

It's the raising of Lazarus from the tomb. So a nice easy one for us to get into this morning. And as Matthew was saying we're going to kind of mix it up a little bit this morning by breaking this into three parts and hopefully that gives us a little bit of time just to reflect. We're going to come back to Lazarus at the end but let's see how all this starts in the Gospel at the beginning of chapter 11. Now a man named Lazarus was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay ill, 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 ill. When he heard this, Jesus said, This illness 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.

[2 : 15] So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, 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 are going back. Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours of daylight?

Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they 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.

[3 : 26] But let us go to him. Then Thomas, also known as Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

Leaves us with a lot of questions, doesn't it? On the surface, this story doesn't really start well.

Jesus gets this message from the two sisters, Come, come quickly, come quickly.

It's a cry for help. And what does he do? He stays put for two days. He doesn't seem to mention it from the text to his disciples.

He makes no preparations to go. He doesn't even send back a message to say, Don't worry, we're on our way. He just stays there in the Jordan.

And Mary and Martha, back in Bethany, helplessly watch their brother pass away. That's tough.

Now, I know that we know the end of this story.

[4 : 39] Okay? But if that was you, I wonder, how would you feel? How would you feel? The name Bethany means poor house, or house of misery, or house of affliction.

It's not the greatest, first choice of place to live, really, is it? But, I mean, it's likely that it got that name because there was a hospice there for the sick.

And we think probably for those with leprosy. The village is about two miles east of Jerusalem. It borders with the Mount of Olives.

So, literally, you can kind of see Jerusalem. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus appear to have had an open house for Jesus and his disciples.

Bethany and their household, as you probably know, appears in the Gospels on a number of occasions. There's that story where Mary is at Jesus' feet and Martha's fussing around in the kitchen.

[5 : 48] And she feels as though she gets a gentle rebuke when she says, why don't my sister come and help? And Jesus says, no, actually, Mary's doing the right thing. And then the time when Mary actually anoints Jesus' feet with oil.

So, clearly, there is a really close and loving friendship between them and Jesus. So, when Martha and Mary make their desperate pleas to Jesus, the man you love, the man you love, Jesus, is ill.

Okay? You know, when you read that, you can't help but think there's maybe a little bit of a hint of emotional blackmail in there. Because you could put it a lot of other ways, couldn't you?

And knowing about that relationship between them makes it, I think, really hard to come to terms with the deafening silence that seems to come back. Jesus even says, you know, we heard it then in the text here, because he loved them, he's going to wait.

What's going on? Shouldn't it say, because he loved them, Jesus got up and left immediately to go to Lazarus? Just for a moment, put yourself in Mary and Martha's sandals.

[7 : 19] You've sent an urgent message to this one person you know can save your dear little brother's life. You've seen or heard him perform many, many miracles. Some like the centurion servant, healing at a distance.

Jesus didn't even go there. And yet he's not here. Doesn't he know how sick Lazarus is?

We know the end of the story. But it's hurtful, isn't it? It's one of the hardest things, I think, to understand when we're facing suffering or illness or depression or grieving.

And you just want to know. You just want God to show up and fix it. And sometimes you have to trust and wait.

And it's not always getting the answer we want or at the time that we want it. And that is tough. I know it is. You know, I have struggled.

[8 : 27] Okay, albeit maybe in a small way, but I've struggled this year recovering from an illness. And it's been really slow, really slow progress.

I know I am getting better bit by bit by bit, but it's taking time. I've had to learn to be patient. I'm not a good patient. And I know there are plenty of people here this morning, both at church and maybe people listening, who in different ways are still suffering and maybe much, much worse.

They're still feeling the hurt of what they've been through, what they're going through. They're still waiting. We get to see the bigger picture at the end of this story.

But Martha and Mary, they don't know that yet. They're going to have to wait to learn that Jesus' delays are not denials.

And maybe that's something we need to learn as well. And we're going to listen to a piece of music now. I waited patiently for the Lord He climbed and had my kind He brought me on out of the bit And after my reclame I will sing I will sing Sing a new song I will sing Sing a new song How long To sing this song How long To sing this song

[10 : 38] How long How long How long How long How long How long To sing this song guitar solo I will sing, sing a new song

How long to sing this song How long, how long, how long, how long It's quite a haunting, isn't it, but beautiful melody by you too.

By the grace of God, we don't get left there. If you're wondering, what was Jesus doing during those two days? What was he doing as he waited out in the wilderness in Jordan?

Well, from the rest of the text, I think he was praying. Wrestling with, understanding his father's will. I'm pretty sure this really, really wasn't an easy call for him to make. But there was something even bigger at stake than Lazarus' life.

[13 : 05] And maybe another perspective on this is that Jesus was praying for Lazarus. Yes. What should he do?

But he was also praying for wisdom and guidance as to his own plans and destiny. Where was all of this heading?

And I don't fully understand, but somehow the two of them, I think, were bound together. The miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, the most powerful sign in the gospel.

It's the last sign, the last miracle in the gospel of John. And yet at the same time, the start of a plot against Jesus by Caiaphas and the high priests.

Go and read it if you want. It starts in chapter 12. That will soon take Jesus to the cross. And then to his own tomb.

[14:13] I don't know what your thoughts and feelings are about abstract art. Yeah, I guessed as much.

I'm guessing a lot of you probably struggle with a sculpture like this. It's a piece of work by two English artists, Tim Noble and Sue Webster.

It's the sort of thing you're likely to see at the Tate Modern. Has anyone been to the Tate Modern? When we went, it was about 10 years ago, and there was a hall full of gravel.

It turned out it was ceramic sunflower seeds that had all been hand-painted. In fact, it was 100 million sunflower seeds.

Ceramic sunflower seeds. Unbelievable. It obviously had a meaning for the artist. But I look at this, and I don't know.

[15:12] What does it say to you? It kind of looks chaotic to me. You don't even know what the pieces are. If I'm honest, it looks like a pile of random bits stuck together. I don't know what I'm looking at.

The unique thing about this piece of artwork is that you have to bring light to it at the right angle. Okay? And then it reveals, it casts a shadow, and it reveals something hidden, something quite unexpected.

Jesus is coming to Lazarus. He's coming. He's coming to Martha.

He's coming to Mary. But it's not when the sisters wanted him. And he's not going to do what they expected. Because he's moving to the beat of a different drum.

Let's watch our second part of this reading. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

[16:25] 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 now God will give you whatever you ask.

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 they die. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?

[17:26] Yes, Lord, she replied. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who has come into the world.

After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. The teacher is here, she said, and is 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.

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?

[18:35] 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? Such a moving scene, isn't it?

I think it's really interesting that it's Martha that's first on the scene. That's come out to kind of meet Jesus.

This is the same Martha that we said earlier, you know, that comes in for a bit of gentle chiding. For getting her spiritual priorities mixed up when she was sweating the small stuff in the kitchen, getting tea ready.

I love that. I love it when things get switched. I like Martha. I like Martha. She's not afraid to show her emotions.

[19 : 44] She speaks her mind. She's not some sort of cardboard cut out character. And she's angry. She's angry.

Or at the very least, very disappointed with Jesus. If only. If only you had come when I asked. And yet, we get this glimmer still of hope. It's in the text there. It says, but even now. But even now. See, I think there is the beginnings here of a profound leap of trust. Of faith and of hope for Martha. Here in this encounter. And it really only occurs in one other place in the Gospels. When Jesus is speaking with Peter. And he says to him, but what about you, Peter?

[20 : 46] Peter, who do you say that I am? And in this Gospel in John, Jesus takes this standard Jewish teaching.

About the future resurrection. And in a wonderful way, he kind of bursts it into the here and now. Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life.

Anyone who believes in me will live. Even if they die. You know, when Jesus is talking to Martha. He isn't talking to her about a doctrine. Okay? Not some sort of future distant hope. Somewhere out there. He's saying, Martha, I'm standing right in front of you.

Right now. Right here. And I think he's daring. He's daring Martha to trust him. That every glimmer of good.

[21 : 52] Every hint of hope. Is a taste. It's a glimpse of how things actually are. And how things eventually will be. You know, when the light just lines up perfectly.

And shines just at the right angle. And so he meets her in her lowest moment. When she's really got nothing left to give.

And Martha says, yes. Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ. The son of God. Who has come into the world. Hallelujah. She's got it.

And then she totally blows it. Okay? In front of the tomb of Lazarus. When Jesus calls for them to roll away the stone.

And she's full of doubt still. And she says. And this is in the King James. But Lord, he stinketh. Okay? I love it.

[22 : 59] It's so human. It's so Martha. In the tradition, Martha and Lazarus go on to share the gospel with many others.

And I'm convinced that Martha was the big sis in this relationship. She was definitely the head of the household. And after what happened here.

And the resurrection later of Jesus. I like to think that she went to be. She went on to be a leader. A powerful leader within the church. And I know that narrative doesn't necessarily play out very well. In what was a patriarchal society. So we will never know for sure. But we do know that she was involved in ministry with Lazarus. That's kind of part of the given tradition.

And the story switches, doesn't it? To Mary. Mary. She's kept a pretty low profile until now. And it's her big sis, I guess. Martha that's called for her to come and see Jesus.

[24 : 07] What's been going on in her head? Why didn't she come with Martha? Mary is often portrayed as the more emotionally and spiritually sensitive of the two sisters.

And I wonder if the trauma, and it was a trauma, it must have been, of the last four days has taken its toll. It's rocked her faith.

The disappointment, the heartache, just crushing down upon her. So that she just couldn't face even seeing Jesus until she was summoned.

And when she does see him, she just falls down at his feet and weeps. We're not told explicitly. But I think the emotional rollercoaster and the hopes dashed have left Mary broken.

[25 : 13] The cracks will heal. The cracks will heal. The cracks will heal in time. And in the end make her stronger. And she's going to go on to minister with John in Jerusalem.

But right now, I think she's broken. And then something quite remarkable, something deeply moving happens.

Jesus, on seeing Mary, on seeing the others, bursts into tears. He's driven to the point of tears.

And he knows how this is going to end. There's no sense of triumphalism here. There's no sort of smug, I know what's going to happen.

There's no, don't worry, don't worry Mary, it's going to be okay. This cuts him deeply to see the suffering and anguish that this has brought on those that he loves.

[26 : 25] And I wonder. I wonder if there's any tears in here as well. For another death to come.

His own. I will never. I'll never forget the letter my father-in-law, Jack.

Lisa's dad left us. After he died. We all sat down the dining room table. With our boys.

Josh and Dan. And we did our best to read it out aloud. And the first line just said this.

Tears. He was right. What a long, long journey these last 19 months have been.

[27 : 34] I wonder, are there any tears? Are there only if-onyms that we, that you, need to let go of?

We'll stay seated for a moment and just reflect on what Ian's just been sharing.

And there's a song that was on my heart over the last few days for us to sing. Through the rollercoaster of life through the last 19 months.

The difficulties that we may have faced. And the pain. And also for those that we know and love and perhaps are not with us anymore.

And it speaks of a rock in times of trouble. And lifting us up when we feel down.

And I'd just like us to use these words to give our feelings and thoughts to God this morning. Thank you.

[29 : 17] God of all. I depend on you. I call out to you.

Again and again. I call out to you.

Again and again. Again and again. You are my rock in times of trouble.

You lift me up when I fall down.

All through the storm. Your love is the anchor.

[30 : 25] My hope is in you, Lord. A heart and other, Lord.

You're my holy heart of peace. In your love and peace. I'm so unchanging Ageless one You're my rod of peace Lord of all I depend on you I call out to you Again and again I call out to you Again and again You are my rock

In times of trouble You lift me up When I fall down All through the storm Your love is the anchor My hope is in you alone God bless you Let us changeasses As you say 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 odor, 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.

[33 : 26] 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 round his face.

Jesus said to them, Take off the grave clothes and let him go. Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

In the ancient world and in a hot climate like Israel, when someone died, they were buried in a tomb almost immediately.

Jewish mysticism taught that a deceased person's spirit remained hovering around the body for up to three days.

[35 : 01] But by the fourth day, the spirit departed the body and went to Shaul or Hades. So if you came back after that, it was definitely a miracle from God.

I don't think it's an accident that Jesus deliberately waits four days until he comes to the tomb and calls out Lazarus so that no one can be in any doubt.

You know, Lazarus isn't just a bit dead. Lazarus isn't just mostly dead. He is completely dead. He's dead dead.

Or Jed. We've seen Martha stumble a little bit in her faith. But as Jesus says that prayer and calls Lazarus out, he steps out of the tomb.

You can almost hear the gasps of those that were standing around. And it isn't going to take long for the religious authorities to find out what's happened.

[36 : 21] We don't think much, at least I don't, about this from Lazarus' perspective, do we? He's been dead four days. Dead, dead. I'm guessing he's pretty disorientated, okay, to say the least.

I'm pretty sure he's quite confused as he steps out of that tomb. I mean, thankfully, it's really hard to imagine, but how would you feel?

Hmm. What does he remember? If anything. There have actually been several speculative books written about what happened next.

There's one author, Kahil Gibran. He's actually a Sufi, and he portrays Lazarus as a man who is unable to properly rejoin the community after he's raised.

He's a Lazarus who stays on the fringe of daily life. He's a shadowy, half-empty sense to his life. He longs to return to the experience of the next life and he resents the fact that he was brought back to life and all it has in terms of its limitations as an experience.

[37 : 49] And for him, food has no taste. Colors are drab. Life in the world for Lazarus has no vitality. It's an empty, it's quite a sad portrayal.

I think it's interesting. I think it may speak to us about sometimes how we live our lives. we exist. But it's not a picture that I share of Lazarus.

See, I don't imagine Lazarus yearning to return to the other side. But rather, I see him eating and drinking and laughing and enjoying himself and understanding what it means to be truly alive.

I imagine a Lazarus who's light in spirit and he's not weighed down by the stresses of all those things, all those things that normally fill up our minds and hold us back from experiencing the sheer vibrancy of being alive.

life. The new Lazarus has gone beyond tears, beyond fears and anxieties.

[39 : 05] He's experienced his life as nothing less than a wonderful gift. yes, he knows that one day he's going to die again. But now he's able with such assurance and trust to move into a new dimension of life's fullness.

One that's richer than we can imagine, I think. So the raising of Lazarus is a story about the fullness of life in the here and now.

but we all know because it's our daily experience that even life in fullness can throw some pretty tough challenges our way.

Maybe through illness, through losing someone close to us or loneliness or losing that job or struggling to make a relationship work, whatever it is.

Yes, there are miracles but more often than not, God doesn't change our circumstances. He changes us slowly so that we discover that inner peace and strength to endure whatever life is going to throw at us, to choose faith instead of fear.

[40 : 37] not that life is going to be any easier necessarily for us or that we no longer have to deal with all those issues and those circumstances but now we come with steadfast hope.

It's a living hope, a deep hope within us of resurrection life life. So that then the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guards our hearts and our minds through Christ Jesus.

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