

Sunday 8th March 2026 - Journey To Jerusalem: The Raising Of Lazarus

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Date: 08 March 2026

Preacher: Laura Edwards

[0 : 00] Okay, so this morning we are starting a series of talks called Jesus' Journey to the Cross, which will lead us towards Holy Week and the Cross.

So today in the first of these talks we are going to be exploring the raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel. This account is told only in John's Gospel and John is a master storyteller.

So we're invited into some of the most intimate and revealing moments of Jesus' life. The strange and powerful story of the death and the raising of Lazarus.

So let's see what happens in the first part of the story. 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.

[1 : 20] 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. 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.

[2 : 27] 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 also go, that we may die with him.

So John starts simply telling us, a man named Lazarus is sick. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick.

Not one of your followers, or disciples, the one you love. And we've seen the siblings, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, before in Luke's Gospel, when Martha opened up their home to him, and again in John, where Lazarus reclines to eat with Jesus, as Martha serves, and Mary pours fragrant oil on his feet.

[3 : 52] Bethany seems to have been a place Jesus could rest, talk, eat, and be with those who loved him. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were his friends.

Jesus wasn't a distant preacher who travelled around. He built real relationships with those around him. He got to know them, spent time with them, and loved them.

When Jesus hears Lazarus is sick, we expect urgency. We expect him to run. But Jesus doesn't do this. Instead, we hear he stayed for two days longer.

This is hard to understand. Surely when it's someone we love, we rush as fast as we can to them. It reminds me of one of the most stressful parts of parenting I've found.

There's been a few. But when the girls were little, which was getting a call from primary school, telling me that one of them was poorly, and I needed to pick them up. They'd go mad if they knew I was sharing these photos.

[4 : 58] I've been in various places when I've received these calls. I've been on a train, in meetings, at a conference, and even in London.

Sometimes just at home, five minutes drive away. But the point is that once I knew that they weren't okay and needed me, I was panic struck and wanted to get to them as soon as I possibly could.

And this was never helped by the school office adding things like, well, she's so upset we can't do anything with her. Or, you might need to take her to hospitals to get that ankle looked at, but we'll leave it up to you.

And I think for most of us, if we got a call that someone we love needed us, it's instinctive to want to do everything we can to get to them.

But not only was Jesus not there when Lazarus died, he also missed the funeral and the burial. And it doesn't make sense with what we know about Jesus and how we're told that he loved Lazarus.

[6 : 00] And then Jesus says some quite strange, unexpected things. He says, this illness does not lead to death, it is for the glory of God.

So he wasn't being indifferent or uncaring, this was deliberate. And he then had a confusing conversation with the disciples where, once again, they didn't quite get it.

So he told them plainly, Lazarus is dead and for your sake I'm glad I was not there so that you may believe but let us go to him.

And again, these can seem like harsh words from Jesus. I'm glad I was not there. Undoubtedly, if Jesus had been there, he would have healed his friend. But then the timing of this last miracle and its purpose was so important.

So that you may believe, he tells them. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. And John really emphasises this detail.

[7 : 06] It isn't a coincidence. In their culture, the soul was thought to linger near the body for three days. But after this, death was irreversible, hope was gone.

John wants us to know that what Jesus is about to do is not resuscitation but resurrection. So let's watch what happens next.

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 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.

[8 : 19] 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? 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.

[9 : 40] 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 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.

[10:56] 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.

before the miracle, both Martha and Mary declare the same thing to Jesus.

If you had been here, my brother would not have died. indignant Martha and weeping Mary. If you had been here, if only.

[12:17] And I wonder how many times we have said that to God, to ourselves, when we forget to have faith and question everything. If only I hadn't gone out that night.

If only I'd said this. If only I hadn't lost my temper. If you were there, Lord, how could that bad thing have happened? But, after Martha says this, she adds something.

She says, But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask. And Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again.

And she answers, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. So she believes the doctrine. She knows somehow, at some time, God will set things right.

But Jesus shifts her focus from when, to a person, himself. And then he makes one of his I am statements. He says to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

[13:26] 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?

Not, I give resurrection. I am resurrection. Not one day I will bring life, but I am life.

Resurrection is not an event in the future. It is embodied in him. And he asks if she believes this.

And she says, yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who is to come into the world.

Martha has just declared he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the promised one. It is what biblical scholars call a Christological confession.

And the only other person in the Gospels to state this is Peter. And when Peter said it, Jesus said he would build his church on this profession of faith.

[14:30] Martha gets it. She has spoken it. And she is right up there with Peter. And then Mary comes along, the same words, if you had been here.

But unlike the theological conversation with Martha, she falls at his feet and weeps. And what does Jesus do?

We are given two words, the shortest verse in the Bible, Jesus wept. The Gospels used in Greek this wonderful word, *splanchnosomai*, which is translated to show pity, mercy, or sympathy.

But the root of the word means inward parts of an animal or human. Jesus is gutted, deeply, viscerally moved here.

Once again, the English words can't quite capture the gut-wrenching nature of Jesus' feelings here. And the Greek implies that Jesus gets progressively more moved.

[15:42] His anger and frustration grow until he eventually bursts into tears. Here in Bethany, faced with death, grief, despair, hopelessness, Jesus weeps.

He stands with them at the graveside and weeps, showing when we grieve, we never grieve alone. Jesus demonstrating here he is indeed fully human and as the story unfolds, fully divine.

As humans, one thing we have in common is that at some point we are sure to experience grief of some kind, be that from death of a loved one or grieving a relationship or situation that we might still long to be in.

Grieving is hard. We are told there is no right way to grieve, although people have long tried to make sense of it. For example, you might have heard of the theory of five stages of grief by Kubler-Ross.

My main experience of grief was when I lost my beloved mum 13 years ago. The girls were very small and I was devastated and angry, so angry with death, with life, with God.

[16:57] But this week, looking deeper into those two words Jesus wept has given me such reassurance that Jesus got it. He experienced it.

Those gut-wrenching feelings, the pure despair. Not only does he get it, but he is with us always. So, back at the graveside, Jesus instructs them to move the stone. Martha protests about the smell as she will understand back then in the Middle East that bodies will decompose very quickly and Lazarus has already been dead for four days. I prefer the King James version where she says, no, he stinketh. And then Jesus prays so the crowd will understand that the Father sent him. And he cries out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. And still, wrapped in grave clothes, he walks out alive. Can you imagine the reaction, the gasps, the shock, the joy?

[18 : 09] And Jesus tells them to unbind him. The grave clothes have to come off. And isn't this still what Jesus does? He calls us out of death and frees us from what once bound us.

Fear, sin, shame. And I think it's worth noticing here that Jesus instructs people to do things. Move the stone, unbind the grave clothes. Jesus was just about to raise a man from the dead. Surely he could have sorted out the stone. And it reminds me of the first miracle or sign in John's Gospel, the wedding at Cana. There again, he's instructing others, bring the jugs, fill them with water. Again, he could have easily conducted the miracle all on his own. But he chose to involve others. These miracles were collaborative. Jesus is working with us, alongside us. They involve a partnership where human action, faith and obedience act as a catalyst for divine intervention.

[19 : 20] And I wonder if there are areas in our lives where we want Jesus to work. Are we expecting it just to happen? Or do we need to take action, listen to God, or be obedient before something can happen?

Yet there is still more. This story points beyond itself. Jesus' disciples had been right to be wary about returning to the region so soon. There would have been many mourners at the house when Jesus arrived. It was tradition. If families didn't have a lot of mourners, they would hire whalers for the occasion. So there were Jews from there nearby Jerusalem that went back and reported it to the authorities. For years now, Jesus had been causing rumblings among them. Working miracles on the Sabbath, he'd forgiven sins, healed people.

[20 : 23] But it was the raising of Lazarus that pushed the Jewish leaders towards anger, frustration, and eventually plotting his murder. The religious leaders were angered that Jesus was attracting large crowds and followers.

They were upset that the news of Jesus might reach the ears of the Romans and upset political as well as the religious status quo. But further still, they had ruled with fear, violence, and death as the ultimate threat. What Jesus had done by raising Lazarus, he had defeated death and taken away the fear and control of the authorities. Jesus restored life to Lazarus at the expense of his own life. He was setting the stage for the redemption not only of a friend but of the whole world. Jesus would give his life as a ransom for the many just as he gave earthly life back to Lazarus beside that Bethany grave. Soon he would give eternal life to the whole world hanging on the cross at Calvary. It is no wonder that the Jews were irate. Jesus had defeated death once for a friend and he might do it again for the world.

[21 : 42] He had to be stopped. The Pharisees and Sadducees conspired together. John writes concisely, so from that day on they planned to kill him.

And next week Ian will be talking more about how this unfolds. So what does this mean for us today? Like Martha, Mary and Lazarus, Jesus knows us and deeply loves us. Delays don't mean that God isn't at work in our lives. God does not watch our suffering from a safe distance. He steps into it. He stands at gravesides. He weeps. And sometimes we have to work with Jesus. We might have to take action and be obedient. And one day we will rise because the one who stood outside Lazarus' tomb still declares, I am the resurrection and the life.

[22 : 53] not I was or will be, I am right now for you. And I end with this quote from Joanna Weaver at the end of a chapter called Lessons from Lazarus.

And I think she just puts this beautifully. Today we suffer. Today we don't understand. God has been upon us all this time.
all the tragedy, all the darkness will instantly be swallowed up by triumph. What a perfect ending to our imperfect stories.
Amen.