

Where There is Life, There is Hope

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[0 : 0 0] I wanted us to look at this passage, John 11, as the title of our mission is Real Life, Real Hope. This is one of the most moving, most wonderful passages in the New Testament, tremendously relevant for us today and I want to go straight into it.

If you've been a Christian for a couple of years, you may be familiar with this story and that's a problem because it's quite shocking. And I want to move through the story and just share with you three central surprises, three central shocks, which I think take us to the heart of what Jesus is saying here.

The first is, if you noticed in the first four verses, the first shock is Jesus' delay. Did you notice in the first four verses that there's Mary and Martha, the sisters with a brother Lazarus, close friends of Jesus, and Lazarus falls desperately ill and they send off a heart-wrenching message to Jesus in verse 3, Lord, he whom you love is ill.

I mean, they know Jesus can heal, they know he has the power, they know he loves Lazarus. And in verse 4 we read, verse 5, verse 6, he stays where he is.

Don't you think that if Jesus loved Martha and Mary and if he had the power to make Lazarus well and if he had any feelings whatsoever, he would march straight up to Bethany and heal Lazarus from whatever he has.

[1 : 3 3] But he does not. It's a surprise, isn't it? He deliberately stays where he is. And we learn later in verse 14 that he waits until he knows Lazarus is dead and then he goes to Bethany.

Now, we know that Jesus has a very good reason for delaying. We know that he waits for Lazarus to die so that he can go up to Bethany and give to Martha and Mary a far greater gift than just making him better.

But put yourself in Martha and Mary's shoes for just a moment. What possible reason could there be for Jesus to delay? Does it not seem to you just a little cold and heartless and cruel?

And this is the way we naturally think about God, of course. God just does not do what we want, when we want, how we want. I mean, if God was doing his job better, he could run the world in a way that would suit my needs, don't you think?

I mean, if I ask God what to do and he doesn't do it, he's not doing his job and he's not much of a God. You hear this. People say this. If I were God, I would...

[2 : 5 0] And then you fill in the blank. And behind that is the thinking that I am far more compassionate than God is. We tell God he's wrong.

He's wrong to allow what he allows, to not do what he doesn't do, without a scintilla of self-doubt in our own great moral superiority. Some of us have had the courage to go to Jesus and tell him what we think he should do.

And for the life of us, we cannot understand why he doesn't act. It seems heartless that Jesus doesn't intervene or doesn't change what's going on.

And we begin to ask the question, does he really love us? And I want to show you, at the beginning of verse 6, in the Pew Bible it's translated, so, it's actually the word, because.

Verse 5 says, Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister Mary, therefore, so, because, because he loved them, when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer.

[3 : 55] It is because Jesus loves Martha and Mary that he delays. He doesn't delay because he's careless or cruel, he delays because he loves them.

And he does not give us what we want for exactly the same reason. He is always seeking to give us something far greater, something that we may need.

And I say to you, that God's delays are always the delays of love. That's the first surprise. The second surprise is where the spotlight is focused in this miracle.

I'm sorry about having Nora read just sections of it. It's a long story, and I urge you to take it home and read it through this afternoon. When Jesus comes up to Bethany and arrives, Martha and Mary, each of them express their mind to him.

And you can imagine their disappointment. How many times has Martha gone out to the edge of the village while Lazarus was still alive, hoping that Jesus would come, only to be disappointed and have her hopes dashed?

[5 : 02] Verse 21, When he does arrive, you can hear her disappointment. She says, Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

And Jesus says, your brother will rise again. And she says, yes, yes, yes, I know at the last, she thinks Jesus is just giving theology. But you see, both Martha and Mary are not clear about who Jesus is.

They know he can do the healing thing. They know he's no ordinary man, but they are a long way from grasping that the one who stands before them holds the keys of life and death in his own hands.

They don't know that he is God in the flesh. And with great loveliness and graciousness, in verse 25, Jesus reveals it to them. You see, he says, I am the resurrection and the life.

He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? It is utterly mind-numbing, staggering self-confidence.

[6 : 14] Don't you think? Jesus is claiming that he is the life, that he is the resurrection, that in his hands are the keys to death, and hell. Nobody makes that sort of claim, particularly when there is a dead body nearby.

What do you say to someone who is grieving? Where do you point them? Someone who's lost a loved one recently. Jesus has the audacity to point Martha and Mary straight towards himself.

I am life, I am life, he says, I am resurrection. He says, it is possible for me to give to you, dead and dying people, a life that will continue through the experience of death, that laughs at change, that has eternity within it.

He says, all who trust in me, because I am the resurrection and the life, even though you die, will live forever and ever and ever. It's not that you'll die and be reincarnated as Pocahontas or the Lion King or someone.

He's saying, if we believe in him, death itself cannot take our life. Isn't that amazing? When we come to trust in him, you see, he shares his life with us, and the life that Jesus has is that eternal life, so that what makes you and I a Christian is not having an open and active spirituality, it's not church attendance or being a kind person or being baptized.

[7 : 42] It's having the life of Jesus Christ within us. It's trusting in him, relating with him, and having him live through us. That is why the emphasis, the spotlight of the story, is not really on the miracle.

Have you ever noticed that, that the miracle is told in very brief compass? Down in verse 43. When Jesus had said this, he cried out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

There's a famous Sunday school story that says, why did Jesus say, Lazarus, come out? And a little child answered and said that if he hadn't said Lazarus and if he'd just said come out, everybody who had ever died would have come forward from the grave, which I think is probably true.

Good theology. And then verse 44 we read, the dead man came out. That's it. Incredibly undramatic. No drama, no Oscar winning performances with just a word.

Jesus raises the dead to life. There's no media there to cover it. Three words. Lazarus, come out, and he does. Not since the creation of the world has a voice spoken with such power so that even death obeys it.

[9 : 02] Here it is, the one power against which we are powerless bows before the voice of Jesus and obeys. Jesus is absolute Lord over life and death.

He says to death, come, and it comes. He says, go, and it goes. And when the words reach the ears of Lazarus, death has met its match.

There is no authority that can stand before the one who is the resurrection and the life. Mr. Death can tear every human bond in the universe apart from this one, the one that exists between the believer and the Lord Jesus Christ who is the resurrection and the life.

Mr. Death, he cannot penetrate below the surface of our relation with him. It's wonderful. Three words in the Greek. The dead man came out. It's a ludicrously short account of the great miracle.

You would expect, would you not, that CNN would be there or at least there'd be a TV miniseries developed but not here. And I think the reason is because the focus of the story is not really on the miracle.

[10 : 15] This is why. The fact that Jesus can raise Lazarus from the dead is very impressive but utterly irrelevant to you and me unless he can do the same thing for us.

Isn't that true? It has no meaning, no significance unless he can raise you and me to life. And the bridge between this amazing miracle and his ability to do the same for us today are the words of his promise where he says, I am the resurrection and the life.

It's the same with every miracle in John's Gospel. The miracles are signs which point forward to the person of Jesus Christ and to what he can do for us now. The raising of Lazarus to life again points to the truth of this brilliant promise as Jesus stands among us today as the living and risen one.

He says, I am the resurrection and the life that anyone who believes in him, anyone, anyone, even though they die will live. And when we come to trust him, he shares this life, we receive the very life of God and death can never take that away.

And I think that's the second surprise, the delay, the focus. But there is a third surprise which in some ways is even more moving. It is that Jesus weeps.

[11 : 35] Let's go back before the miracle to verse 33 and we didn't read this earlier. When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and literally troubled himself.

And he said, Where have you laid him? And they said to him, Lord, come and see. And then the shortest verse in the Bible, Jesus wept. And the Jews said, See how he loved him.

Some of them said, Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man for dying? Lazarus has been dead for four days now. Jesus is with everyone who weeps.

And then we read in verse 33 that Jesus himself weeps. Now I find this incredible. If you were the resurrection and the life and if you knew you were just about to march up the hill to the grave and raise Lazarus from the dead, would you weep?

I wouldn't. I would say, Be calm. Everything's okay. Just wait a few minutes. Jesus weeps.

[12 : 49] It's not because he's powerless or impotent to change things as we've just seen. Some years ago, Rabbi Kushner wrote a book which is called When Bad Things Happen to Good People.

His solution to the issue of suffering in the world is that God is weak and powerless. The argument goes like this. If God were good, he'd want to end suffering.

If God were powerful, he'd be able to end suffering. There's lots of suffering. Therefore, take your pick. He's not all-powerful. And there's a Kushner light version of this that circles in Christian circles these days which says that God is really only interested in the big ticket items.

You know, wars and peace and famine and that sort of thing. He's too busy. He's not really interested in the individual circumstances of our lives. But Jesus' tears wiped that all away.

Jesus' tears show how empty that is. Here is the one who is the resurrection and the life. He has the power of life in his hands and yet he weeps.

[13 : 54] And he washes away, the tears wash away every superficial, every philosophical, every abstract attempt to deal with the problem of evil and suffering and our attempts to play God.

Why does he weep? Jesus weeps because he sees death for what it is. The obscene result of sin, that which has held us, all of us, every man and woman and every child held us captive ever since we were expelled from the garden of Eden.

And God made us, he made us in his image. Death was no part of his creation. Man and woman in the garden could eat of the tree of life forever and ever, living in harmony with God and harmony with each other and harmony with creation.

But when they refused to listen to the voice of God, when they rejected God by disobeying him, they turned their back on God and they turned their back on life and the result, says the Bible, is death.

It's the penalty for separation with God. So when it says in verse 33 that Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled, the words have this overtone of anger.

[15 : 03] Jesus is offended. as all the results of our sin and our disobedience are focused and concentrated here in death and all of human suffering and all of misery rise up before him the result of our stubbornness and our selfishness and our sinfulness and it presents itself in death before Jesus, he is indignant with this contradiction to the purposes of God and he weeps.

and I want you to ask the question this morning, what kind of God is this who weeps with us and suffers with us? It's wonderful.

You know, Jesus doesn't step back like a moral teacher and just say, well, practice detachment. He doesn't offer us a philosophy. Here he is standing in our place facing what we face and his tears are not the anger are not the tears of frustration and futility but of someone who loves us and who's passionately involved who knows he himself is going to go to the cross and face this great enemy.

He so closely identifies with us that he deals with the one thing that we cannot deal with and when he goes to the cross Jesus defeats death by dying our death and in this gospel if you read it through at the moment of his death he cries out in great triumph it is finished.

He takes the power of death into himself and snaps its neck. That is why Jesus is the resurrection and the life for us.

[16 : 45] It's not just because he is God, it's not just because he has the power of life in him it's because he dies our death and now offers eternal life to all who will believe in him.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. And if that is true it means that life is not what it seems to mean today.

And if you live in Vancouver we quickly get the idea that life is about three A's assets achievements and amusements. You know the better house RSPs education for the kids the better retirement.

But there are two different kinds of life. One is biological life that we receive when we are born and we are busy telling God that we can do a better job on how to start that and how to finish it.

That's biological life. But there is a different kind of life resurrection life spiritual life eternal life. life. And this life which comes to us from one place alone from the person of Jesus Christ it makes us alive to God.

[17 : 56] It gives us real hope in Jesus Christ. A new love for others. A new certainty of God's presence. It's a life that death cannot take away.

It's not found in religious observances. It's not found in moral abstraction or philosophical reflection. It's found in trusting Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Placing him at the centre of our affections. Bowing before him in obedience. It's believing that he is the resurrection and the life. And allowing him to live in us and to live through us.

Real life is not found in possessions or people or performance. It's found in Jesus Christ. and that means that death is not what it seems to be.

Not the end. It's not the final word. It's not the termination of all opportunities. But Jesus is the absolute Lord and Master over life and death.

[18 : 59] And for those who trust him the experience of death does not break that relationship. And the question that Jesus asked Martha is the same question for each of us this morning.

He said I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this? So the day is coming when all who are in the graves will hear the voice of Jesus Christ and they will come out some to the resurrection of life and some to the resurrection of condemnation.

And real life and real hope come in receiving Jesus Christ in trusting him in knowing him and in loving him. Will you receive him?

That's the question for us. I want you to take your hymn sheet now and turn to the second hymn which we're going to sing in just a moment. And in these words the first two verses speak about the love of God and the death of Christ for us.

But in the third verse we sing these words I will boast in Jesus Christ his death and resurrection. Receive him and love him and trust him as we sing these words together.

[20 : 16] Let's stand. Amen. Amen.