

## **LAZARUS RAISED FROM THE DEAD**

I am going to look at the story of the raising of Lazarus in some detail this morning, so you might like to open your Bibles at page [\*\*\*] so that you can follow it along with me.

Lazarus was the brother of the sisters Mary and Martha and evidently a good friend of Jesus. They all live at Bethany, just a couple of miles outside Jerusalem, so it is likely that Jesus had stayed and visited on many occasions which are not recorded in scripture. When Lazarus became sick his sisters sent for Jesus – but as we saw Jesus does not respond swiftly and Lazarus dies before Jesus arrives.

I think that today many people have trouble coming to terms with this story simply because most people in our society are unfamiliar with the reality of death let alone a resurrection. Not so long ago, when someone died the body was prepared for burial at home, and when the undertaker came to the house he brought a coffin with him and then the wake took place right there, usually in the living room. As a matter of fact, most doors that were installed in houses were specially made large enough to accommodate the size of a coffin. Lifts in Monaco are still made that way. Afterwards a family had the typical time of mourning then everyone followed a procession to the local church where the service took place. Today, bodies are usually kept at the funeral parlour, there is little or no visitation and then the service is often held at a crematorium rather than the church. People want to lessen the impact and reality of death.

I heard about a most unusual funeral in America. A wealthy man stated in his will that he had to be buried in a brand new

Cadillac. He specifically said that he was to be sitting at the wheel wearing expensive casual clothes with a martini in his hand. And he had hired a large piece of machinery to lower the car into the grave. He wanted people to see that he went out in the manner he had lived. In order to fulfil the deceased's wishes and to inherit his money, his brother did exactly what had been specified, but he only left the car in the grave for a minute or two. Then he brought it all back up, had the body placed in a coffin, buried him in the hole and then he sold the car and walked away with all the money. Now, as absurd as that was, what was the dead man trying to say? I think he was trying to convey the idea that he was having just as good a time as he had when he was living. But listen, while his body was in the Cadillac with a martini in his hand his soul was standing in the presence of God. He might have been conveying the idea that he was ignoring the reality of death and the afterlife but it all caught up with him – and he didn't even get his wishes anyway.

The fact is; people fear death, even in our reading today. The opening words of our reading today are really Mary rebuking Jesus for not responding more promptly to her call for help. Look at verse 32:

“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."” (John 11:32 NIV)

To see the reason for this we need to look back a little in this Chapter 11 – look at verses 1-7:

“Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, 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 sick." When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea.'" (John 11:1-7 NIV)

Now we are not told what sickness Lazarus was suffering from, but it clearly must have been serious both because Mary and her sister called for Jesus to come and because Lazarus died quite quickly. Yet Jesus doesn't come immediately but stayed where he was for two more days and then decided to respond to the sisters' call. There are some important lessons for us there. God's delays are not necessarily God's denials. Even when God decides to give a positive answer to our prayers that answer doesn't necessarily come immediately, we may have to wait. But, God's timing will be perfect. Even though, as we saw at the beginning of our reading, Mary thought that Jesus was too late, it's never too late with God, he has the power to do immeasurably more than we can ask or conceive of. So it was here. As we saw from our reading today, the sisters were hoping for a healing from sickness, but actually received a healing from death, a resurrection.

Sometimes we don't know why the answers to our prayers are delayed, but in this case I think we can see why. Jesus wanted to test the faith of his loved ones, to teach them about timing and patience and through that testing to grow their faith. He also wanted to display the power and majesty of God to those who were witnesses, to those who would hear their testimony and indeed all those who would receive the words recorded in John's gospel down the ages – including all of us here today.

But why did Jesus wait for two days? Verse 39 tells us that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days when Jesus arrived, so even if Jesus had set out immediately when he heard the sisters request, Lazarus would apparently have been dead for two days anyway. Thus, I think the answer to our question lies in the beliefs and burial customs of those times. Bodies were normally buried immediately due to the hot climatic conditions and lack of refrigeration. However, mourning would go on for at least seven days after the burial, becoming more intense after the third day, when the spirit was believed to finally separate from the body and depart. Some Jews believed that certain magicians could accomplish resuscitation during the three day period after death before the spirit finally departed, but held that no one could be brought back to life once the three day period was over. Jesus was not affirming that belief, but he was accommodating it by delaying things so that his arrival came after the end of the critical three days. Jesus did not intend that the forthcoming raising of Lazarus should be dismissed as merely the work of a capable magician. In the new testament the raising of Jairus's daughter and the widow's son at Nain were raised from the dead, but those resurrections occurred quite soon after the deaths had taken place. Here Jesus proved beyond any doubt that even if the body is decomposed God can raise up a man from the grave. This is how we are going to be resurrected if we die in Christ.

When Jesus first said to Martha that Lazarus would rise again, just before our reading in verse 23:

“Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."” (John 11:23 NIV)

Martha thought that he was alluding to a resurrection of Lazarus on the last day. In those days, most Jews other than a sect called the Sadducees, believed in a resurrection on the last day – so it's no surprise that Martha was able to accept this. But Jesus was going beyond Martha's focus on the healing he could have performed in the past if he'd been there and her hopes for a resurrection in the future. He was trying to tell her that his resurrection life was being made available NOW in more ways than she realised. Jesus isn't just for the past or just for the future – he's also a Jesus for today.

Moving on to verses 33 to 35 of our reading, we see the overlap between Jesus' deity and his humanity:

“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” (John 11:33-35 NIV)

The rendering of the last part of verse 33 is actually rather a poor effort by the NIV. The Message does rather better and puts it that “a deep anger welled up within [Jesus]”. The Greek word used here ‘embrimaomai’ invariably speaks of anger when used in relation to human emotion, in fact it could be translated as Jesus snorted like a horse, so we can take it that Jesus was angry, perhaps against the ravages of sin and death on humanity, or against the hypocrisy of the Jewish onlookers or the relative unbelief of the sisters who had spent so much time with him. Verse 35, Jesus wept, is actually the shortest verse in the Bible. But Jesus' weeping is completely different from that of the professional mourners. The Greek word used here means to weep convulsively. That is the perspective Christ wants us to have. If you are hurting, he wants you to know that he weeps with you.

So God was grieving standing by a rough hewn tomb, expressing a volcanic grief and anger over the ravages of sin, over the fact of death and suffering and the unbelief of people who should have known better. He is about to call a man back to life and telling his sister that life doesn't end at the grave. He is a compassionate God who grieves with me and suffers more than I can imagine suffering. He's a God who was prepared to set aside his deity and humble himself, but He's also an all powerful God who holds the keys to life and death. That's the God I think is worth believing in. That's the God I commend to you today.

Then we come to the climax of this story. In verse 38 of our reading Jesus arrives at Lazarus's tomb and in verse 39 he commands that it be opened up – look:

“"Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days."” (John 11:39 NIV)

A typical tomb of those times would have had the capacity for eight bodies in indentations in its walls – three on each side and two at the end – so there might well have been other bodies from earlier burials in this tomb.

Martha objects that Lazarus's body will by now have started to decompose and there will be a stench. In a way we can sympathise with her she didn't understand what Christ wanted to do and was not keen to gaze on the putrefying corpse of her brother.

Jesus tells Martha that she is about to see a miracle and commands the others present to take away the stone sealing the tomb – look at verse 40 and first part of verse 41:

“Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone.” (John 11:40-41 NIV).

It is likely that that the stone here was covering the mouth of a pit rather than being a stone which could be rolled away (as with Jesus’ tomb) since the Greek word used here carries the sense of ‘carry’ as of a burden. Here I think we can see the stone as a barrier to Lazarus receiving the benefits of Christ’s resurrection power.. Similarly, there are barriers which prevent us from receiving the benefits of that saving power. Barriers that prevent us from entering into a saving faith in Christ. Like the stone these barriers in our life must be carried away.

Jesus then prays to the Father for a miracle – see the second part of verse 41 and verse 42:

“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."” (John 11:41-42 NIV)

We can take heart from these words of Jesus. True they are spoken by the sinless Son of God, but let our struggling souls take heart. Our Father is a God defined by his alertness to our cries. As it says in Psalm 65:2 ‘O you who hear prayer ...’

Picture the scene. The stone was carried away. They could see Lazarus’ body, and possibly other bodies. The eager crowd pressed forward. Suddenly they grew quiet. The sisters, who had been weeping, stopped with a sense of expectation. Our Lord’s eyes, which before had been weeping, were now aglow. Suddenly Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” – see v. 43.

He did not have to shout, but he wanted everyone to comprehend the drama. Here I believe that Jesus called Lazarus specifically by name otherwise the whole graveyard would have arisen. Then the miracle occurred – see verse 44: “The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”” (John 11:44 NIV)

As the crowd stared into the bowels of that grave, they saw movement. They saw Lazarus’ body edge off the stone, then stand erect and emerge mummy-like into the sunlight. According to Jewish custom the body would not have been fully mummified, but rather wrapped round with a large linen cloth and tied at hands and feet with further strips. The head would have been wrapped in a separate face napkin to keep the jaw in place. So bound, a living person could still shuffle or hop, as Lazarus apparently now proceeded to do.

Jesus then orders his release. Death has been robbed of its prey. Mary and Martha feverishly began to unwrap him. Then came joyful carrying on as they wept over him, hugged him, and danced about in their bare feet. The funeral had become a party! This should become a party for us too! We see the good news of the ultimate power and authority of Christ. In the raising of Lazarus Jesus made good his claim, ‘for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out’ (John 5:28). The devil’s power, though real, is limited. His reign in death (Romans 5:17) is only temporary.

Here I think we can liken the grave clothes to those elements remaining in our lives which prevent us from fully experiencing and receiving the benefits of Christ’s

resurrection power. Lazarus was instantly resurrected, just as we instantly receive justification from Christ when we first come to faith in him and enter into eternal resurrection life. But Lazarus was not enabled to fully enter into the benefits of his resurrection life until his grave clothes had been stripped away – elements of his former existence in death remained with him and hampered him. In the same way when we are justified by faith elements of our old sinful nature remain with us and are only gradually stripped away as we are sanctified and made more Christ like.

Today is All Saints Day when we remember the martyred saints of the past. Now, the Greek word for martyr can be translated as either martyr or witness. Lazarus may not have been a martyr in the usual sense, but I certainly think we can say he was a great witness as to Jesus' attitude towards death

Let's close with a few words of prayer. Father we see that if we go on one verse beyond the end of our reading to verse 45 we find that many who experienced the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus turned to Jesus in faith. I pray that looking at this miracle together this morning will strengthen the faith of all of you who are already believers in Christ's salvation and bring any who are not believers into a new and vibrant faith in Christ which will ensure that on the last day Christ will call you forth to life in his kingdom with a loud shout of "come" – just as he did for Lazarus.