

"Jesus, The Resurrection and the Life"
John 11:1-54
Carol Martin

The setting for our lesson this week is a family that knew and loved the Lord Jesus. They lived in Bethany, a little hamlet some mile-and-a-half outside Jerusalem on the other side of the Mount of Olives. It is the place where Jesus often found rest and refreshment when surrounded by the press of ministry. We all need a place like that . . . a place of refuge, a place to be ourselves. And for Jesus, it was a place where He was not faced with a constant barrage of questions or requests or the push for another miracle. He was able to simply be with them, and they grew in their love relationship.

John wrote some 40-50 years after the other gospel writers, and, as I mentioned when we first started the study of John, his message is the deity of Jesus. So, of the many signs and miracles Jesus performed, John only includes seven of them: the water changed to wine; healing of the nobleman's son; feeding of the 5,000; walking on water; healing a man born blind; and raising Lazarus from dead.

In this last and most dramatic sign, the One who is Life confronts death and overcomes. This event is the doorway through which we enter into the passion of the Lord Jesus. It's as if the glimpse of splendor seen in the raising of Lazarus is but a foretaste of that greater glory that breaks forth when Jesus steps forth in radiance and power on Easter morning.

Also, there are interesting similarities between Jesus' first sign at Cana and His last at Bethany. Each takes place within the intimacy of the family circle – one at a wedding, one at a funeral. The central purpose of each was that the glory of God might be manifested; that is, the power of the Father made visible in the action of the Son as He turned water into wine and the tragedy of death turned into the joy of life. In each case, faith was born or renewed. At Cana, Jesus' disciples believed on Him, and at Bethany they were strengthened in their faith.

My outline has four points:

- ☑distress and delay,
- ☑death and danger,
- ☑disappointment and discouragement, and
- ☑deliverance and demise.

Distress and Delay

We learn immediately that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was sick. And so, the two sisters sent a message to their Lord saying just that, "Lord, the one You love is sick."

Conspicuous by its absence is the lack of invitation, "Please come." It's like the nurse at an elementary school calling a mother and telling the mother that the child is sick at

school. The nurse doesn't ask, "Will you please come?" She just assumes the mother will come and asks, "What time will you be here?" It's with that same urgency that the sisters sent their message.

Upon receiving the message Jesus said, "This sickness is not unto death." Now He didn't mean that Lazarus wouldn't die, in fact, he was probably already dead when Jesus got the news. He meant, "Death is not the ultimate in this sickness. There is more. This sickness will not ultimately end with just death, but for the glory of God. The ultimate end of this sickness is to bring glory to God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it."

Therefore, Jesus did not go immediately. As a matter of fact, He purposely delayed going another two days. The messenger was sent back alone.

Now some would say, because Jesus didn't go immediately, "He didn't love Lazarus" as we think He should. Others would say, "Well, He didn't really know how sick Lazarus was or He would have gone and not let death overtake him." Verse 14 takes away that thought. It says Jesus knew the very moment Lazarus died even though He was removed by miles. He is the omniscient Son of God. Things weren't out of hand; they were in His hand. So, He didn't go, not because He didn't care, or because He wasn't aware, He didn't go because He had a better purpose in His delay.

Perhaps another reason why Jesus waited was related to the mourning customs of the Jews. According to Alfred Edersheim, the burial of the deceased invariably took place on the day of death. The mourning began immediately and lasted about a month but was divided into three periods. The first three days were the most intense mourning and often involved the practice of hiring professional mourners. During the rest of the first week, mourning was less intense and friends were expected to visit expressing their condolences and sympathy. The fourth day after the death was traditionally, therefore, the first day Jesus would have arrived if He wished to come as a friend and visit with Lazarus' sisters. When He did arrive, it was generally believed He arrived too late. In reality, however, Jesus was right on time in the mourning cycle.

I want to say two things about this idea of delay. One has to do with time, the other has to do with perspective.

First of all, as far as the Christian is concerned, you must learn early in the Christian life that the Lord is never late, though He often delays. There's a difference. When you're late, it means you should have been somewhere earlier. But when you delay, it means you purposely planned to come later. When the Lord said "no" to the request, He was not late in arriving, as they thought He was. He purposely delayed the timing for a better reason. One poet writes:

God's help is always sure, His methods seldom guessed:
 Delay will make our pleasure sure, surprise will give it zest;
 His wisdom is sublime, His heart profoundly kind:
 God never is before His time, and never is behind.

The second reason is in perspective (verse 15), that our faith might be strengthened. You notice, Jesus says, "I am glad I was not there, so that you might believe." I think that is a very significant point. Who would ever grow in a stronger faith if every time you asked something you got it? What kind of a stretching experience would that be for you to lay a need before the Father and almost from the time you're brushing off your knees, getting up from prayer, it's at your front door? That could very easily lead to laziness and presumption. But the waiting time is a strengthening time, or it should be.

Adam Slowman in his little booklet "Expectation Corner," speaks of God's "Delayed Blessings Office," where He keeps certain things prayed for until the wise time comes to send them. He writes, "It takes a long time for some people to learn that delays are not denials . . . Men would pluck their mercies green when the Lord would have them ripe." Therefore, will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you. (Is. 30:18 NASV)

Now let's look at **Death and Danger:**

There's something about the word "dead," isn't there? We can handle the word "sickness." We can handle the word "accident." We can even handle the word "serious" or "serious condition." But when that four-letter word "dead" comes into our mind, it's like shrapnel hitting our brains. Death is so dark, so real, so harsh.

Isn't it interesting that one of the ways we handle the reality and the harshness and the darkness of death is through humor. There's a bumper sticker that floats around Southern California from time to time that reads, "Don't take life so seriously! You won't get out of it alive!"

I think Woody Allen probably made the classic comment of humor about death when he said, "Death? Well, I don't fear it that much. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

I had a book in my library of tombstone humor . . .

There's an old wooden grave marker on Boot Hill that reads: "Here lies Les Moore, shot four times with a forty-four – no Les, no Moore."

There's one that appears in jolly old England on an old gray slate stone, slick with age, that says: "Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabella Young, who on the twenty-fourth of May began to hold her tongue!"

Another tombstone says simply, "You can't win."

Outside Wichita there's a tombstone that reads, "I told you I was sick."

We try to make death beautiful. We provide elaborate, fragrant and lovely flowers at a funeral; and that's appropriate. We make plans for lovely, quiet organ music; and that's fine. Perhaps a good soloist; and that's appropriate . . . and all of it to keep death from being so

real. Death – hold it at a distance; make it beautiful. The wonderful truth for Christians is that death is beautiful. Martin Wedge writes this poem titled “Can This Be Death?”

Can this be death –
 To be released from fear and sorrow, from sickness, weariness and pain?
 To be removed from sin’s enslavement, from Satan’s influence and domain?
 Can this be death –
 To be set free from my sin nature, from evil bent to do the wrong?
 To be set free from inclinations that would rob me of my song?
 Can this be death –
 To be presented in His presence, the One who loves me evermore?
 To be accepted in the fullness of Christ whom I adore?
 Can this be death –
 To be escorted by the angels to my home prepared above?
 To be established in the dwelling that is furnished by His love?
 Can this be death –
 To know complete fulfillment as I look upon His face?
 To feast upon the glories and the riches of His grace?
 No, this is *life* –
 With all that it can offer, it is joy that overflows!
 It is peace that knows no measure, it is victory o’er my foes!

The delay was over, Jesus said, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.” Now the disciples thought He meant literal sleep, but Jesus clearly said, “No, he’s dead.” Now the awareness of the danger was presented to Jesus.

“Remember? They were going to stone You and You want to go back?” Thomas didn’t view it from a divine perspective at all. That’s why he says, with sort of a fatalistic twist, verse 16, “Let us go, that we may die with Him.”

You get the feeling as you read Thomas’ words, he’s saying, “Well, men, just dress in black. They’re gonna stone Him and with Him 12 others. We’ll never make it through this experience.” Thomas was depressed but resigned.

Let me say to you before I go any further that the test of our stability comes through at a time of crisis. Proverbs 24:10 says, *If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small*. A time of crisis is a time for stability. But let me add, a time to prepare for crisis does not come at the time crisis hits. It has to come before.

If you’re going along, thinking that you can handle life, and you’re not preparing yourself in your heart and soul for what could come by spending time before God, cleansing yourself, preparing yourself with the spiritual muscle that comes from time in the Word of God, time of trusting, time of communion, you won’t be able to cope. You see, the time to prepare for crisis is not at the time of crisis. It’s got to come before. Our hearts must be prepared by prayerful intimacy with the Almighty, kept warm, open, responsive before the Lord, ready for whatever He may bring.

Well, the messenger had returned alone . . . now we see the

Disappointment and Discouragement of Martha and Mary.

Martha hoped Jesus would show up to heal Lazarus. He didn't. She hoped He'd show up to bury Lazarus. He didn't. By the time He made it to Bethany, Lazarus was four days buried and Martha was no doubt wondering what kind of friend Jesus was. He did not come to help, He did not come to heal, He did not come to bury. "If only . . ." were her thoughts.

The grave unearths our view of God. When we encounter death, our definition of God is challenged, which may also challenge our faith. That leads me to ask, "Why is it that we interpret the presence of death as the absence of God?" Is healing the only way God demonstrates His presence? It's distressing that for many their view of God has no place for death.

Martha, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him . . . "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." She probably didn't intend a rebuke or complaint in her words; she was only expressing her disappointment that her brother had not been healed.

Now Jesus answered and said, "Your brother shall rise again." "I know," she said, "in the resurrection at the last day."

I am moved over Jesus' loving response, not a rebuke, just a promise. I think, if it isn't too much imagination, Jesus could very well have taken the face of his hurting friend in His hands and held it gently or He could have held her closely and embraced her and said to Martha, whom He did love, "Martha," almost with words under His breath, . . . "I am the resurrection and the life, Martha; he that believes in Me, even though he may die, he'll live; Martha, whoever lives and believes in Me will never really die. Do you believe that, Martha?"

I think there's a tenderness here that the hurried student of the Word does not picture. I think the Lord Jesus understood her feelings. Martha had expressed her faith in the resurrection as a principle, but Jesus now reveals the resurrection as a person. He is the embodiment of all life, including the resurrection.

Jesus dealt with Martha's faith; now He had to help Mary. Why did He send Martha to call Mary "secretly?" Possibly because of the danger involved: they knew that the Jewish leaders were out to arrest Jesus. When Mary arose to go to meet Jesus, her friends misunderstood her actions and thought she was going to the tomb to weep. They wanted to weep with her, so they followed along. Imagine their surprise when they met Jesus!

Possibly Mary was so hurt when Jesus failed to come that she turned her grief inward and cut herself off from others during her period of mourning. So when He did show up, why should she hurry to meet Him when He had been slow in coming to her? Could we possible have the same reaction? But when Mary learned that Jesus was calling for her, her great love swept aside all hindrances and she went quickly and fell at Jesus' feet repeating Martha's

thoughts – it's as if they had rehearsed it in their home. Mary said to the Lord, verse 32, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." Both Martha and Mary were grieving, true, but they were also getting their perspective back as they looked into the face of Jesus. Now it was time for the **deliverance** of Lazarus and to face the plans for His own **demise** that would follow.

Deliverance and Demise

Gently Jesus asked, "Where have you laid him?" Jesus was surrounded by all those that were weeping and crying. And it says, "He was deeply moved in spirit, and was troubled." Jesus wept too. Isaiah 53:3 says "He is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Please understand that, though we believe firmly in the Lord Jesus, tears are appropriate when death comes. Grieving is to occur. He's deeply moved when they came to the site of the tomb.

What made Jesus cry? Was it His sympathy for the ones He loved who were grieving? Was it for all people who grieve over the death of a loved one? Was it for His love for Lazarus? We see in His tears the tragedy of sin but also the glory of heaven. Perhaps Jesus was weeping for Lazarus, as well as with the sisters, because He knew He was calling His friend from heaven and back into a wicked world where he would one day have to die again. Jesus had come down from heaven; He knew what Lazarus was leaving behind. The spectators saw in His tears evidence of His love. But some of them said, "If Jesus loved Lazarus so much, why didn't He prevent his death?"

John tells us about the tomb, "it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it." Martha was concerned with the stench since Lazarus had been dead four days. But Jesus said, "Take away the stone."

Now, here's a question. Why take the stone away if He's going to resurrect the body? A resurrected body doesn't need to have a stone removed. The molecular structure of a resurrected body is totally different. The stone was moved to let the people in because this wasn't a resurrection . . . it was a resuscitation. There's a difference. Resuscitation is putting back life into an old body so that it can live on. The stone needed to be removed so the body could get out. So, Jesus had them push the stone back.

He prayed for the benefit of those around Him. And then, verse 43, "He cried out with a loud voice . . . Lazarus, come out!" That's all He said.

Now He identified who was to come out, because as you've heard before, had He not, entire gravestones would have been moved and people would have come out by the hundreds perhaps at that day. But He specified which one He wanted. And out Lazarus came. God spoke and something happened. The dead man heard the voice of the Good Shepherd and came to life.

We might ask why the power of the Lord did not release the body from the grave clothes even as it had released his spirit from the grip of death. To do such a thing would

have been a mistake. In fulfilling the command of Jesus to unwrap him, men went forward to handle this body: they came in close contact with Lazarus and had first-hand knowledge that this was no fake. The process of decay was reversed, and his body revitalized. The power of their sustained testimony became irrefutable.

I've wondered what that must have been like and who unwrapped him? What an experience. You know what they saw? They saw a miracle. In front of their eyes stood a man that had been back from beyond. And the stories he must have been able to tell blows our minds to think about. You'd say, "If I had been there, I would have believed." You know what? Verse 45 tells us other people did too. Many of the Jews, who had come to comfort Martha and Mary beheld what Jesus had done, and believed in Him.

The incident at Bethany encouraged the faith of the disciples and greatly broadened the circle of believers. Maybe now we're better able to appreciate the reason for the great accepting crowds on Palm Sunday who shouted "Hosanna to the son of David" when Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

The story, as we'll see in our next lesson, goes on to tell about Lazarus that evening having dinner with these people. Imagine the great stories of his four days he had to tell those people at dinner! Wouldn't it have been great to be there?

Death, in all of its ugliness, harshness, brutality, and darkness, seems like an enemy, when, in fact, death is a victory. It isn't the end, it's simply the transition that takes us from this temporary life to eternal life. And everybody on earth has eternal life . . . everybody. Not just the Christian. How much the unbeliever would love to think, once I die, I'm gone forever, never to return. Not on your life! Not on your death! You will live, you will die, you will be raised exactly as God promised, and you will answer to the One who made you. Jesus alone is the resurrection and the life.

It's interesting, it was only a matter of time before Jesus too would go to a place of death. His place of death was on a cross. Nails in His hands and feet, a corpse hanging on a cross, taken down, wrapped in that mummy-like fashion, placed in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. The stone was rolled over the mouth of it, and there it rested for three days and three nights, until miraculously He passed through stone and space. And they met Him and they knew Him and spoke with Him and they turned the world upside down. He still lives. He's gone on before us. He says to you and me, "Be sure you're ready, because death is coming. And it will introduce you to eternal life." The question is not, do I have eternal life? The question is, where will I spend it? When death has done its work, what will I say to my Lord?

Well, others who witnessed Lazarus emerge from the tomb went to tell the Pharisees. Caiaphas was the high priest 18 years from AD 18 to 36. The expression "that year" refers to that one year in which Jesus was crucified. Caiaphas was a Sadducee not a Pharisee, but the two factions could always get together to fight a common enemy. Jesus was that enemy and they must plot His demise and destruction. Why?

Jesus' power could not be denied, too many miracles; His preaching could not be forgotten, their best laid plans had not silenced Him; His popularity was growing, His presence could no longer be tolerated. To be neutral was to invite disaster from the Romans.

So, a meeting of the Sanhedrin was called. Unknown to himself and the council, Caiaphas uttered a divine prophecy. Jesus would die for the nation so that the nation would not perish. (Isaiah 53:8 "For the transgression of My people was He stricken.") Ironically, Jesus' death – intended to spare the nation of Israel from physical destruction – was actually to spare Israel from spiritual destruction. John added to his inspired explanation that Jesus would die not only for the Jews, but for all of God's children who would be gathered together in one heavenly family.

Meanwhile, Jesus withdrew to Ephraim about fifteen miles north of Jerusalem and there He remained with His disciples. His hour had not yet come. Soon the crowd would be gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Soon time was drawing near for the final week of Jesus' life.

It's hard to talk about death and the emotions that surround it when we're just coming into the Christmas season. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus – the gift so wondrously given to redeem mankind. But you and I both know that redemption came through His blood on the cross. John 11 reveals the deity of Jesus Christ and the utter depravity of the human heart. The rich man in Hades argued, "if one went to them from the dead, they will repent (Luke 16:30)." Lazarus came back from the dead and the officials wanted to kill him as we'll see in our next lesson.

Miracles certainly reveal the power of God, but of themselves they cannot fully communicate the grace of God. The stage had been set for the greatest drama in history during which man would do his worst and God would give His best.

I spent a long time working through this lesson. I'm moved when thinking about the blessing of delay – God's timing is always better than mine. I'm moved when thinking about Jesus looking deeply into Martha's eyes with soft words of reassurance saying, "I am the resurrection and the life . . . do you believe me?" I'm moved thinking about the compassion of my Savior as He wept before the tomb, and about the voice of the Good Shepherd that brought life to the dead man. I'm moved thinking about the hands of those who unwrap people tied up in insecurity, grief, bondage to prejudices and attitudes, hands that help free others to walk in a new life. I like thinking about the joy those of us who have been unwrapped have when we share what new life is really like.

I mentioned earlier a bumper sticker, "Don't take life so seriously! You won't get out of it alive!" That's the whole point. You will get out of it alive. That's why it must be taken seriously. Life isn't a passing fancy that is here today and to be forgotten forever. Life is a preparation for real living. Life beyond the grave. Are you ready for it? Is Christ truly your Savior and Lord this day? Are you ready for whatever may come in the days ahead?

You must answer the question, "Am I ready to die?" For not until you're ready to die are you truly ready to live. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Perhaps this Christmas season as you wrap those treasures to go under the tree with love and anticipation, you'll remember the Christ child wrapped in swaddling clothes only later to be wrapped in grave clothes, and ponder . . . it's the unwrapping that delights faces with joy!

Let's pray. Father, this is the happy time of year as we anticipate celebrating the birth of Jesus. Homes are being decorated; plans are being made to connect with family; and the world hears music extoling the Lord Jesus Christ. We are so grateful that we know You and Your Son through the Scriptures and have the privilege of studying together each week. I pray for Your blessing on each household represented here during this holiday season. We thank you that we know the Light of Life, Jesus Christ. It's in His name we pray. Amen.

