

Good morning, and welcome to BCF. For those of you who are visiting with us today, my name is David Kingston and I am one of the pastor-elders of this church. Today we begin a three-sermon series from the gospel of John leading up to Resurrection Sunday in two weeks' time. I have titled today's message "The Pathway to the Cross: Lazarus"

Slide

Our Scripture is from the gospel of John 11:1-44. It is a long passage, which is good, because it means that more of the message is inspired.

Slide

John 11:1-44

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."

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

Slide

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has 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. But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Slide

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 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. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Slide

"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

And 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."

Slide

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."

Slide

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. 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 in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 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."

Slide (blank)

Prayer

This is a familiar and yet an amazing story. And its amazing nature has caused some people to question why it is not included in any of the other gospels. How could the other gospel writers fail to include such a public and such a major miracle? Lazarus wasn't the only person Jesus raised from the dead. Jesus also brought Jairus' daughter back to life, as recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as the son of the widow of Nain in Luke 7:12-15. But these miracles were on people who had only just died; Lazarus was not just dead, he was dead dead, having been in the grave 4 days. So this was a "super miracle"; why don't the other gospels mention it? I think that the reason, or at least part of it, is the intense hostility that Lazarus' resurrection provoked. In John 12:10-11 we read

Slide

"So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him." So it was dangerous to be Lazarus! And this may explain why the first three gospels do not mention this miracle, since they may well have been written during Lazarus' lifetime, and the writers wanted to protect Lazarus and his sisters from the vengeance of the Jewish leaders. John's

gospel was most likely written some years after Matthew, Mark, and Luke, by which time Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed by the Romans, and there was no need to hide the story to protect Lazarus.

So what spiritual lessons can we learn from this story? We will consider five aspects of it.

Slide

1. A word of knowledge
2. A word of hope
3. A word of faith
4. A word of power
5. A word of prophecy

Let us look at these five truths

Slide

1. A word of Knowledge

The story really begins at the end of John 10, where we learn that Jesus had left Jerusalem and had gone back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. This place was called Bethany beyond the Jordan, and it was about a day's journey on foot from there to the Bethany near Jerusalem where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. The three siblings were close friends of Jesus.

Slide

Lazarus however became sick, with what was obviously a life-threatening illness, so Mary and Martha send word to Jesus with the implicit request that he would heal Lazarus. They probably knew of Jesus' ability to heal at a distance, or perhaps they had hoped he would return with the messenger to heal in person. Jesus however does neither of these things, but instead says

Slide

"This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

He then stays where he was two more days before telling his disciples they were going back to Judea. The disciples think this is a crazy idea, since the Jews there had just tried to kill him, After he had said this, he went on to tell them,

Slide

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." Jesus here speaks of death as a sleep from which he will awaken the sleeper. The disciples misunderstand, so Jesus tells them plainly

Slide

"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."

So what are we to make of these three statements by Jesus?

I think there are two lessons for us:

Slide

1. **Jesus knows that death is not the end of life.** Death for Jesus is simply a sleep from which he will awaken the sleeper; even in death Lazarus is still “our friend”, and they are going to “him” (not to “his body”) to wake him up. So for the Christian death is not the end; it is simply a sleep from which we will awake when Jesus comes back from his time away.

Slide

As Paul writes 1 Cor 15:51-52 “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” and Chrysostom, one of the early church fathers, wrote "What is death at most? It is a journey for a season; a sleep longer than usual! So that if you fear death, you should also fear sleep!" It is interesting that our word *cemetery* comes from the Greek word *koimeterion*, a place of sleep. So the bottom line is that as Christians we need not fear death; it is simply a sleep-bridge into God's presence.

So let me digress here a little and ask “are you afraid of death? I do not mean “are you afraid of the process of dying?” This is something which no thoughtful man or woman looks forward to. What I do mean is “Are you afraid of what comes after death?” The writer to the Hebrews writes

Slide

Heb 9:27 “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”, and Paul writes 2 Cor 5:10 “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” Are you ready to face the judgment of the holy Son of God? If you are not ready, let me plead with you to talk to me or a Christian friend so that you can face death without fear. The writer to the Hebrews goes on to say Heb 9:27-28 “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

Slide

2. **Jesus knows the beginning from the end of our trials.** Let us first work out the timing.

As we have seen Jesus was staying about 20 miles, or a day's journey, from Martha and Mary in Bethany. So the messenger would have taken a day to reach him, and Jesus then stayed two days where he was, finally returning on the next day, arriving 4 days after the messenger left. When he gets there he learns that Lazarus has been dead 4 days, so Lazarus must have died shortly after the messenger left to tell Jesus that Lazarus was sick.

Slide

He knew from the get go that He was going to raise Lazarus to life, so He could say “This sickness will not end in death” even though He knew that Lazarus was already dead when the messenger arrived from Mary and Martha. He was thus able to give his disciples (and perhaps the messenger too) this message of hope, even though the facts seemed to contradict what he said. And he knows your trials too; we are all in His good and loving hands from now through death into eternity.

Slide

2. A word of Hope

Jesus returns to Bethany and is met by Martha before he enters the village. She says

Slide

John 11:21-26 "Lord, . . . 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. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

This is one of the great "I AM" sayings of Jesus, and what a wonderful truth it reveals. Jesus IS the resurrection in two ways.

Slide

a. He is the resurrection and the life in Himself

He is the one who was himself resurrected from the grave, as we will celebrate in two weeks' time. The Jewish leaders thought they could get rid of Him; Pontius Pilate condemned him to death; the Roman soldiers knew how to kill people and did their job with grim efficiency; the grave was closed with a huge stone and was sealed shut with Roman seals to keep him inside, and yet He burst the bonds of death and broke out of the tomb and scared the living daylights out of His disciples before filling them with joy! Yes, amen; He is THE resurrection and the life!!!

Slide

b. He is also the resurrection and the life to all who believe in Him.

He says John 11:26 "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." So not only is he the resurrection and the life in Himself, but He is also the resurrection and the life to all who believe in Him. And that means you, if you have trusted Him as your Saviour and your Lord. His is your resurrection and your life. The grave will not hold you; your cemetery will be a place of sleep, and one day you like Him will burst the bonds of death and go up to meet Him in the air.

Slide

3. A word of Faith

Jesus ends his great I AM statement by asking Martha "Do you believe this?"

John 11:25-27 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

This is an amazing word of faith. We do not know many details of Martha's interactions with Jesus over the past three years, only that she knew him previously from a visit Jesus had made to her home:

And now, with her brother lying dead in the grave, Jesus challenges her by asking "Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life?" And her response goes beyond Jesus' challenge to believe that He can raise Lazarus from the grave; she says "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

Her confession of faith is similar to that of Peter, who responds to Jesus' question "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do YOU say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Matt 16:15-16

Now we know that Martha's faith was not perfect, because when Jesus commands that the stone be removed from the tomb, she objects, saying (John 11:39) "But, Lord, . . . by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." But in spite of this she is sticking with him and confessing as much as she knows, which is what faith is all about.

And we should note that Martha's confession of faith came before the raising of Lazarus, and of course before Jesus' own death and resurrection. So she had far less to go on than we do, but still she put her trust in Jesus.

And so this brings the question back to you and to me. We know so much more about Jesus than Martha; we have the four gospels, we have the glorious truths of Jesus death on the cross and his resurrection from the tomb; we have the letters of Paul and John and Peter and James and Jude to expand our understanding. Can we, and so we, say with Martha "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."?

Slide

4. A word of Power.

So we come now to the actual raising of Lazarus. Jesus first meets with Mary, who falls weeping at his feet and said, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 32). Jesus is deeply moved by Mary's grief, and "was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." According to one commentator the Greek could be better translated "became angry in spirit and very agitated." This anger was most likely directed at death itself and the pain and sadness it causes, as Jesus heard all the weeping and wailing over Lazarus. But Jesus also wept with Mary and Martha, and this weeping is a model of Christian mourning. Jesus did not wail as someone without hope, but he wept in sharing the pain of loss. Paul says we should not "grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13).

Jesus then orders the mourners to take the stone away from the entrance of the tomb. Martha's objection that there would be a stench due to decomposition highlights the greatness of this sign. Jesus is raising someone who would already have begun to decay. The Jews of a slightly later time period believed that the soul keeps on returning to the grave, thinking that it will go back into the body until three days after death, but when it sees that the facial features have become disfigured, it departs and abandons the body. So Jesus' raising of Lazarus is a double miracle, because in Jewish thought Lazarus was not just dead but was dead dead.

So now the scene is set. The stone has been rolled back, and 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." He was saying that this miracle was not just for Mary and Martha and Lazarus, but for all the curious spectators standing around. He then calls out in a loud voice

Slide

"Lazarus, come out!"

I agree with those who have suggested that Jesus had to specify that it was Lazarus who should come out, otherwise every occupant of that grave would have come out! And out he comes, probably hopping or shuffling because of the grave clothes, and Jesus tells them to take off the grave clothes and let him go.

What a miracle! And the simple lesson for us is that because Jesus is able to raise the dead, even the dead dead like Lazarus, then we can be sure that He can raise us up at the last day. He is worthy of our full hope and trust and confidence.

5. A word of Prophecy

We now come to the saddest part of this chapter. Some of the Jews seeing the raising of Lazarus go back to Jerusalem to report what they had seen to the Pharisees, who then call a meeting of the ruling council, or Sanhedrin. They are scared that Jesus will cause an uprising and that they will lose their places of privilege.

Slide

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life. John 11:49-53 NIV

There is more than one lesson for us here, but let me just focus on one. It was by the raising of Lazarus that Jesus has sealed his own death. Knowing that this would be the case, Jesus still went ahead and did it, which shows that his death was not a horrible accident but was part of God's plan for His kingdom. By giving life to Lazarus Jesus put his own life on the line, but it is only through his death that life comes for the world.

6. Conclusion

So we can rejoice that death is not the end of our lives, that we have a Saviour who offers the hope of the resurrection, that we have a saviour who invites our faith and our trust, that we have a saviour who brings the dead to life, and who willingly faced death for us.

What a great Saviour we have!! Let us rejoice with Jude (Jude 24-25)

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.