

## SERMON

**I AM the Resurrection and the Life** (John 11:1-44)

Death. It use to be sex, but now it is death. At one time the taboo subject which was always talked about in hushed tones was sex. Now everyone talks about it openly, but death has taken its place. Many social commentators put this down as beginning with Queen Victoria, when her Albert died. She and the whole country went into mourning and changes in attitudes to death also came in.

One Samuel Courtauld cashed in on the nation wearing black and turned most of his mills at Pebmarsh, Braintree, Bocking and Halstead in Essex over to making black cloth – thus the Courtaulds empire really grew. Also it was the era when undertaking became a profession and they took the deceased away from the place of death to dress it and return it to the house. Previous to this it was the domain of the women in a family to prepare a body for burial and the local carpenter would make the coffin.

Death became something that we, as a nation, have become less and less acquainted with. And now we are less and less connected with death and so to many it is a taboo subject, one we do not talk about. I have heard some say, Christians and non-Christians that they do not want to talk about death because it might bring bad luck and even cause a death of a loved one!

Jesus gets news that his friend Lazarus is sick, but instead of going at once he delays for two more days and then journeys to Bethany from the Eastern side of the Jordan, probably just over the Jordan from Bethany. However we read later that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days, but the initial message to Jesus is that he is only sick.

So someone is sent to Jesus from Bethany and takes a day to find him. Lazarus must have died virtually as soon as the person left and so Jesus waits two days, knowing that Lazarus is already dead, then the day's journey back and so we have the four days.

I say Jesus knew that his friend Lazarus was dead because in verse 4 we read

**“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."”** (John 11:4 NIV)

This sickness will not end in death, not that Lazarus will not die, but that it will not end in death, so that God and that Jesus will be glorified. This is the first time we are introduced to the Bethany family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary and so John puts in the biographical bit in verse 2

**“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.”** (John 11:2 NIV)

But the incident of Mary pouring perfume over Jesus is not recorded until John 12 which meant two things

1. That there were Christians at the time when John wrote his gospel
2. That the Christian community knew of the perfume-pouring incident.

So Jesus delays, so God the Father and he can be glorified. And so Jesus goes to the village of Bethany, risking death. Jesus left Jerusalem, and Bethany is not that far from Jerusalem, because he was nearly stoned and went to the other side of the Jordan for safety reasons. We read in chapter 10:31

**“Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?”**

**“We are not stoning you for any of these,” replied the Jews, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”**

**Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods’? If he called them ‘gods’, to whom the word of God came— and the Scripture cannot be broken— what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.” (John 10:31-39 NIV)**

So even with great danger, Jesus and the disciples arrive in Bethany and the first family member to speak to Jesus is Martha. Level headed, practical Martha who thought it better to cook a meal for Jesus and the other visitors that day, than abandon the meal to listen to Jesus. Martha cannot understand why Jesus delayed. Verse 21

**““Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (John 11:21 NIV)**

But she does have belief that death is not the end. Because when Jesus says to her in verse 23

**“...“Your brother will rise again.”” (John 11:23 NIV)**

She answers

**“...“I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”” (John 11:24 NIV)**

Then Jesus says of himself

**“...“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?”” (John 11:25-26 NIV)**

For Jesus death is not the end, death is not a nothingness afterwards. There are those around who are nihilists who say that when you die, you die and that’s the end of it. Aristotle the Greek philosopher once said

**Death is a dreadful thing, for it is the end**

Aldous Huxley wrote

**If you’re a busy film-going, newspaper-reading, chocolate-eating modern, then death is hell!**

And it would be if that was the end, the final chapter. But death is not the end, not the final chapter. Earthly death is only a transition from earth to heaven or hell.

In a survey done in this country, some 35% of people believed in a god or supreme being, but in the same survey some 52% believed in heaven although only 37% believed in hell – we all like to think we are going to a good place and not end up in a bad place!

Maybe it is that death has become more and more of a taboo, hidden subject as belief in God dwindles because people are not so sure now what happens after death. Jesus said

**“...”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?”**

(John 11:25-26 NIV)

Note he says the resurrection and the life, not just resurrection. We think of resurrection as that part after death, what happens to us when we die. For something to be resurrected, it must die first. Jesus was resurrected three days after he died. Lazarus was brought back from the dead when he had been in the tomb for four days. Lazarus was not the only person in the Bible to be brought back from the dead. There was

- Jairus’ daughter – the girl to whom Jesus said

**“...”Talitha koum!” (which means, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.”** (Mark 5:41-42 NIV)

- Widow’s son at Nain where it seems that out of compassion Jesus goes up to the coffin and brings the widow, her son back to life.

**“Soon afterwards, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”**

**Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.**

**They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.”**” (Luke 7:11-16 NIV)

I think I might be filled with awe at a time like that! But Lazarus is different. Lazarus is so dead that there is some consternation about rolling away the stone at the entrance to the tomb because as Martha says

**“...”But, Lord,...”by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.”**” (John 11:39 NIV)

or as the King James puts it

**“...Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been [dead] four days.”** (John 11:39 KJV)

He stinketh. The body of Lazarus had already begun to decompose, the widow’s son at Nain, and Jairus’ daughter had not been dead that long and had not begun to decompose.

Also this miracle only occurs in the gospel of John. Such a great miracle, but it only occurs once in the gospels. I remember in the film *The Greatest Story Ever Told* the first half of the film is ended by the raising of Lazarus to the sound of a great Hollywood orchestra, the full works and people running off from the scene shouting that Lazarus has been brought back from the dead.

So why does it only occur here?

- Maybe it never happened at all and that John made it up to fit in with the saying that Jesus said

**“...”I am the resurrection and the life...”** (John 11:25 NIV)

This does seem a little far-fetched – why make something up so outrageous when there were other resurrection stories around as we have seen already.

We do have to be careful with this type of thinking, of explaining away the miracles as I can remember my headmaster at secondary school doing when he was taking us for ‘O’ level Religious Education. C.S. Lewis argues in an essay that if we do away with the miracles of Jesus, then we do away with the greatest miracle of all – i.e. the miracle of his resurrection. If that miracle did not happen then none of us are saved and none of us go to heaven, even if it exists!

- Maybe the gospel writers were letting Lazarus, and possibly Mary and Martha die, so that there would not be such a beating to their door to hear the story. Remember that John is thought to have written his gospel well after the other three were written.

The miracle happened, but we do not really know why only John recorded it. However Jesus said

**“... ”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?”** (John 11:25-26 NIV)

Which is, that he is not just interested in the bit after death, he is interested in life now. As Christians we must be those who look forward to the future. Paul certainly did as he says

**“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”** (Philippians 1:21-24 NIV)

His desire is to die because that is far better. Too often we cling onto life, life at all cost. We have something that we are going onto that is far, far better.

But we carry on living now for Jesus. As was said on Thursday evening at the 40 Days of Purpose Bible Study and if you missed it, you missed a real treat from both physical and spiritual food. But we heard

**God has given us just enough time to fulfil the purposes for which He made us.**

God is interested and gives us life now, life that can be focussed, life that can be purposeful, life that is abundant. It does not begin at earthly death, but is right now. The communion service is rooted in the death of Jesus, but it is also rooted in the present with Jesus.

But how does this happen? It does not come to everyone. Jesus goes on

**“...Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”** (John 11:25-26 NIV)

It is only those who believe in Jesus, that will live. And this means the present – what happens now. Jesus is as interested in our lives now, as he is when we undergo earthly death. Jesus is our great high priest and constantly intercedes for us to the Father, to God the Father.

Jesus wants us to have life now. That is why he gives us a way to live – way that will give us abundant life, fulfilled life, life everlasting, that starts on earth, now. A life that will bring God glory.

**“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."**” (John 11:4 NIV)

And how do we bring God glory, because our lives have been brought back from death?

**“"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."**” (John 11:27 NIV)

You are the Christ, the Son of God. Can we readily say that as well?