

Matt Henry
John 11:17-44
18 March 2018

“Dead Man Walking”

Grace and peace...

We’re looking at the story of Lazarus today, who was a friend of Jesus. He’s a good example of what happens when life meets death. So much of what we see on a daily basis—every newspaper, every tragedy, every school shooting and bridge that falls, every cemetery plot seems to tell us that death conquers life. And so we need the example of Lazarus to counter all those claims and say that in Christ, life conquers death! Lazarus rose. We’ll rise. So will all the loved ones we have lost. We have all wept over death. Jesus wept too—and we can find comfort in that—but there’s more to Jesus weeping as we’ll see. In order to understand Jesus, we have to know why he is so deeply moved. It’s not what you think it is. There’s something that moves him so deeply that it should move us as well.

Lazarus is a friend of Jesus and the brother to Mary and Martha. Jesus loved them all. Mary was the one who anointed Jesus’ feet with perfume and wiped them with her hair. Martha was the busy worker bee. And Lazarus—well, he’s the guy that died. He is only mentioned in John 11-12, but it’s a detailed

account. Jesus waits for Lazarus' death to occur. He purposefully doesn't show up in the village of Bethany until day four after his death.

When he gets there, everyone is mourning. This is a full-on village response. Mary and Martha are getting all the casseroles by now. Our first clue that this is a big deal is in v. 19: "many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother." This gets at a possibility that this was a prominent family because people showed up. They traveled a couple miles from Jerusalem. I mean, we all know some funerals are bigger than others depending on the circumstances. This family had a lot of connections. Another sign this family was wealthy is because of that expensive perfume/nard that Mary poured over Jesus' feet and wiped with her hair. It was very costly.

Martha and Mary separately but both say to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And they're absolutely right! But is it blame, guilt, or are they just processing outloud: "What took you so long? Why weren't you here?" The words that cut the deepest come from people we love. I'm glad Jesus wasn't there initially because then Mary and Martha would not know the power of Jesus. They needed to move from bereavement to belief. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though

he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Last Wednesday, we talked about how God farms. A farmer sows seed into the ground. Sounds normal enough, right? Well, let's take that concept and apply it to burial of a person. The person is the seed, sown in the ground. He is buried in the earth like a seed. And one day, in the resurrection, he's going to spring to life. Now that's a wild idea, but that's what Farmer God is doing. Sowing seeds. Read 1 Cor. 15. It's all there if we're willing to see it that way.

Luther said, "The cemetery or burial ground does not indicate a heap of the dead, but a field full of kernels [or seeds], known as God's kernels, which will verdantly blossom forth again and grow more beautifully than can be imagined." That's the harvest he's patiently awaiting. You want to talk about "bloom where you're planted", here it is! That's a different take on your average committal, but it's a biblical one. The resurrection is always meant to be in view. That's why Jesus says what He says. But why does He weep?

Jesus is not trying to fit in with the crowd. There were mourners. Some of them were professional mourners that were called in for the job. Imagine that. Getting paid to grieve. "The Best Grief We've Got or Your Money Back!" In fact, the Mishnah prescribed that even a poor family should hire at least two flute

players in addition to a wailing woman. Verse 33, “When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.” What is the sense of Jesus being deeply moved? We have some choices...

- a) Grief and sadness
- b) Anger, outrage, indignation
- c) Empathy
- d) Despair

Then here it comes, the Sunday School verse everyone could memorize. John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” But why is Jesus weeping?

It’s not the best line we have as parents, but perhaps you said this one to your kids. “Stop crying or I’ll give you something real to cry about!” I don’t think Jesus is weeping for Lazarus. He’s going to raise him back to life—as He said at the beginning, it won’t end in death. The Jews said, “See how he loved him!” They’re mistaken. In John’s gospel, the Jews are always wrong. No, it’s not for Lazarus. Jesus is weeping for those who are weeping without faith. He is weeping for those who do not believe. He is deeply troubled by their unbelief. Anger is even in the mix. The people who are there came from Jerusalem. They are from the opposition. They have rejected Jesus and as a result, they are leading Mary and

Martha down a road that doesn't lead to hope or life. So it's a righteous anger, just like tipping over the tables in the temple was a righteous anger. He is outraged at their resistance and unbelief. It grieves him. It's just like when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem because of their unbelief (Matthew 23:37). "How I wanted to gather you as a hen gathers chicks under wings, but you were not willing!"

I found this quote in my commentary on John. I had to read it three times to get it as it explains why emotions are sometimes bound together. "Those who follow Jesus as his disciples today do well to learn the same tension—that grief and compassion without outrage reduce to mere sentiment, while outrage without grief hardens into self-righteous arrogance and irascibility." (Carson, 416) I think it means we can be both mad and sad at the same time and those emotions tug at each other when we care about someone or something so deeply. That, by the way, was my phrase of choice as a little kid when I was upset. I would say, "I'm mad and I'm sad!" Little did I know I could write a commentary based on that observation!

I'm asking you today when's the last time you grieved for someone because of their unbelief? When's the last time you were mad and sad for them? Here's the stark truth, friends. We'll see and be with believers again; but we won't be with unbelievers. That should grieve us fully so we are motivated properly into

action. Frankly, it's amazing at how well we suppress this emotion. But it may well be that God meant for it to come out, as Jesus is demonstrating here. So I say, for the good of the heart, let it out. But I don't just want to leave you in an emotional soup of madness and sadness. I want us to take action. After Jesus weeps, He does something about it.

Let's get to the uncommittal and see Jesus work. Jesus says, "Take away the stone." Look at the language in v. 39, "Martha, the sister of the dead man..." Just a reminder there, Lazarus is still dead. She's rightfully worried about the stench. This is not a "stick-it-to-em with stick-ups" kind of situation.

Jesus prays to the Father and concludes, "I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe you sent me" (v. 42). It's a prayer for faith so that they would believe. Jesus cries out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And it's often been observed that it's a good thing that Jesus called Lazarus by name because if he hadn't been specific, everyone else who was dead may just as well have risen to life too. Look at v. 44. "The man who had died came out..." Lazarus was a dead man walking.

It's hard to walk when you're all bound up in grave clothes, by the way. The body was laid on a linen sheet that was twice as long from head to toe. The ankles were tied together by linen strips, as were the wrists as they rested on the

body. And there's the face cloth too. This is all good detail because Jesus will be wrapped in the same way in grave clothes. And the rock will be rolled away from a similar type cave. It's all foreshadowing the moment when life conquers death and Jesus is the one who can be described as the dead man walking. He was dead, but now He is very much alive because He is the resurrection and life.

If Jesus can do this for one person, he can do it for all. We will hear Jesus shout on the Last Day (1 Thess. 4:16) and we'll rise. We know this. We believe this. We just want everyone else to believe in it too. Our hearts are designed to break over the things that break God's heart and rejoice in the things that God rejoices in. As we share and live out the Gospel, put your heart into it.

In Jesus' name, Amen.