

“Jesus, the Grave Robber?”

John 11

8/30/15

When our son, Stephen, was about 3, he loved to watch “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” on TV. On one show, Mr. Rogers’ goldfish died. He carefully wrapped it up and laid it in a hole he dug in the backyard. Then he told a story about when his dog died when he was a child, and sang a little song about feeling sad. Stephen was watching carefully. Then Mr. Rogers came back inside and looked right into the camera. “My goldfish is dead,” he stated. “Will it come back to life again?” Stephen nodded yes. “No,” said Mr. Rogers. “It is dead. It won’t come alive again.” I think that was Stephen’s first experience with death, and he learned that death is final. I was grateful for the way Mr. Rogers handled this sensitive subject (although watching the show again on YouTube yesterday, I was reminded how painfully slow that show really was!)

At some time or other, all of us have to confront the fact of death. Death is a reality in our world, and it is final. Someone who is dead can no longer interact with us. And that is a great loss.

Today’s scripture story deals with the death of one of Jesus’ closest friends. You may not think of Jesus as having friends, but in addition to the disciples, the Bible mentions three special friends of Jesus- Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. We’re told that Jesus loved each of them. Whenever he came to Jerusalem, he stayed with these siblings at their home in Bethany, just two miles from the city. In John chapter 11, Jesus learned that Lazarus was very ill. After some discussion with his disciples about the inherent danger of returning to Jerusalem, where people

had recently tried to kill him, they all went to Bethany. Here's what happened next.

*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.*

*<sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup>She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (John 11:17-27)*

There's a lot packed into these verses! First, we're told that when Jesus arrived, Lazarus had already been dead for four days. That's significant because many rabbis of the time taught that the spirit or soul of the person hovered around the body for three days, hoping to be reunited with it, but by the fourth day, the soul gives up and leaves. In other words, Lazarus is really, really dead. There is no hope of healing here.

Then Martha comments that if Jesus had been there, her brother wouldn't have died. On its face, this is a statement of faith in Jesus' ability to heal. And I think it is a statement of faith. But there may also be a bit of a rebuke in it, for Mary and Martha had sent for Jesus several days earlier, and Jesus had waited two days to come! When his disciples asked why he was waiting to go, he said something cryptic about his delay resulting in God's glory. At any rate, Martha may have been hurt by Jesus' delay when her brother needed him most.

Then Jesus announces that Lazarus will rise again. Martha seems to take these words as standard words of consolation, something along the lines of "I know he's in a better place now." She replies that she knows that Lazarus will rise again at the last day, a common Jewish belief. Jesus then makes a statement that reverberates to this day. I rarely perform a funeral without quoting it. He says, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."* (John 11:25,26) Let's reflect on these words for a minute.

Jesus isn't just waiting for the time in the future when God will raise all his followers to life; he is the resurrection, present tense. What does that mean? The next sentence helps to clarify. He says that those who believe in him will live again after they die. That's pretty straightforward, though it is a remarkable promise. Death does not get the final word for us. There is life on the other side

of death. We will die, but we trust Jesus' promise that we will live again. That's what I preach at funerals. And that gives us hope at those dark times.

But there's more. He also says he is "the life." And he goes on to say that those who live and believe in him will never die. What does that mean? Well, every single follower of Jesus from Jesus' time until today has died or will die, so Jesus clearly didn't mean that his followers would avoid physical death. Here and elsewhere, Jesus promises that a new kind of life is available to his followers now- a life in the Spirit, a connection to God- and that even death itself cannot extinguish that life. We often think of eternal life- life without pain, suffering, guilt, etc.- as something that begins in the future, after we die. But Jesus taught that we can enter into that life now. Not completely, but he taught that heavenly things are breaking into this world now and we can experience and catch glimpses of them as we follow him. Eternal life begins for Jesus' followers right now. And that life cannot be ended by death.

The story continues. <sup>28</sup>*When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."* <sup>29</sup>*And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.* <sup>30</sup>*Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.* <sup>31</sup>*The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to*

*weep there. <sup>32</sup>When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

*<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (John 11:28-37)*

Now Mary has her time with Jesus. In a previous story, she was the more spiritually-attuned sister. This time, she runs to see Jesus, accompanied by the many mourners who were there. She repeats Martha’s comment about Jesus’ absence when her brother died. Then, a very revealing thing happens. To fully understand it, you need to picture the scene Jesus would have seen. I had an experience a number of years ago that may shed some light on it.

Stephen Black was a 14 year-old boy, who was part of my youth group. He was the youngest of five children in the Black family and the only boy. The entire family doted on him. One late summer afternoon, Stephen was playing in his yard with some friends when a thunderstorm came up. As he and his friends were hurrying inside, Stephen was struck by lightning and killed instantly. The entire

family was devastated. I remember his mother showing me the charred tennis shoes he was wearing when I visited their home.

As Stephen's father was a high-ranking military man, the funeral was held at Arlington Cemetery. I will never forget the sight of Stephen's four sisters and his mother as they threw themselves on his casket and absolutely wailed in grief during the graveside service. It was unnerving. It was heart-wrenching.

It was something like the Middle Eastern funerals you may have seen on TV news. And that's the way it would have been in Jesus' time. Loud, desperate wailing. And it moved him. In fact, the Greek phrase for Jesus' reaction is a strong word that implies some anger. What was he angry about? Probably that death and sin had won again, causing pain and suffering to those he loved. But that was about to change!

*<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with*

*a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"* <sup>44</sup>*The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."* (John 11:38-44)

Pretty cool, huh? When I heard this story as a child, I heard it in the King James Version of the Bible. We always loved the part when practical Martha objects to Jesus' request to open the tomb. In the King James language, she says, "By this time, he stinketh!" We thought that was pretty funny! Anyway, in Jesus day the deceased was buried within 24 hours, due to the heat of the region which rapidly decomposed the body. The dead person was wrapped in many layers of cloth along with burial spices totaling almost one hundred pounds! The tomb would have been a small cave with a large wheel-like stone rolled in front of it. When Jesus calls Lazarus back from death, Lazarus couldn't have walked out of the tomb. He would have looked more like a mummy and would have had to hop out! That's why Jesus has to instruct people to "unbind" him, so he could walk and move again.

At any rate, the crowd was absolutely bowled over by this stunning miracle of God. Jesus' claim to be the Son of God had already been bolstered as he calmed a storm, restored sight to the blind, forgave sin, and fed the 5000. Now, Jesus demonstrates his ability to give life, which only God can do! We're told that many believed as a result of this miracle.

What do we do with this tremendous story? I'm drawn back to Jesus' question to Martha in verse 26. After Jesus announces that he is the resurrection and life and explains what he means by that. I can see him looking directly into Martha's eyes as he asks, "Do you believe this?" So I ask you that question, "Do you believe this?" Do you believe that Jesus has power over death and can assure your eternal future? Can you trust him for that, rather than trusting in your own ability to earn God's favor?

And can you trust him to give you new life right here and now? A life characterized by joy and service, rather than shame and drudgery. A life devoted to following him, believing that he knows what is best for you. A life lived trusting him to meet your deepest needs, following his commands. Do you believe this?

*\*Credit for this sermon's title goes to Mark Batterson's book [The Grave Robber](#).*