



Lazarus! (John 11:1-44)

Alive #4 | Mar 24, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Preached by Steve Howell

Opening



Today is Palm Sunday! (Hooray!)

Churches all over the world will celebrate today, especially many “liturgical” churches (aka – the ones that follow tradition and ceremony, like Catholic and Lutheran and Orthodox). They will pass out palm branches to everyone and then share in customary observances like reading of the account of Christ's entry into Jerusalem, carrying and waving the palm branches in processional, blessing the palms, singing traditional hymns, and making small crosses with palm fronds.

Our church is less traditional when it comes to such celebrations, so the only palms we have are the ones we brought in (our hands). But that doesn't mean we value the origins of those traditions less. Today marks the beginning of an important time in Jesus' ministry – his arrival into the city of Jerusalem as his death on the cross approaches. This is the beginning of the week that will end in his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Jesus knows the somber importance of His upcoming fate...but at this time, the crowds don't. At this point, they're still excited and ready to welcome him with fanfare!



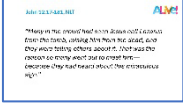
“The next day, the news that Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem swept through the city. A large crowd of Passover visitors took palm branches and went down the road to meet him. They shouted, “Praise God! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Hail to the King of Israel!”” (John 12:12–13, NLT)



Why the crowds? It seems obvious to us on *this* side of the cross and the empty tomb. Jesus is the Messiah! Jesus is God the Son! He is the King of Kings! *Of course* He deserves adoration and worship and celebration!

But for the Jews in Jerusalem, they were living in a time before this was clear. They had heard about this man, Jesus, and what he could do. Rumors of miracles had been swirling – healings, and casting out demons – along with accounts of his authoritative teaching. He was an impressive figure...perhaps he might even be the one who could help the Jews overthrow their Roman colonizers who ruled Judea. Jesus might be the key to returning Israel to independence! (Hence the waving of palm branches as a symbol for Israel).

Those thoughts had been simmering for a while, but they boiled over into mass adoration due to one event that took place recently, dramatically, and powerfully just a couple miles outside of Jerusalem, in a nearby village called Bethany.



“Many in the crowd had seen Jesus call Lazarus from the tomb, raising him from the dead, and they were telling others about it. That was the reason so many went out to meet him—because they had heard about this miraculous sign.”

(John 12:17–18, NLT)

Some events just get more attention than others.



Examples:

- **A volcano:** the eruption of Mt Vesuvius vs the eruption of Mt Pinatubo
- **A home run:** Kirk Gibson’s walk-off home run in the 1988 World Series vs. Bobby Witt, Jr.’s third inning home run in a 2023 away game
- **A shoe:** the release of the first Air Jordans vs the first SHAQ shoes at Walmart

Sometimes the stage is larger; the timing is right; the impact is more profound.

That’s the case with Lazarus.

Jesus had raised others from the dead during his ministry. But, clearly, the resurrection of Lazarus was a bigger deal, with the stage, timing and impact all coming into focus. This story is one we want to hear!

Review

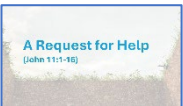


In our current sermon series, we’ve been reading stories of resurrection that we see in the Bible. We are exploring the details and learning lessons about **God’s character, priorities, and goals** in each resurrection story... because those ideas can **inform** and **transform** our daily lives.

So far, we’ve heard examples like Elijah and the widow’s son, Peter and Tabitha, and the church in Smyrna. Today, though, we tell a story of resurrection that dwarfs them all in terms of attention.

And when we’re done, you won’t be paying attention to the dead guy!

Turn in your Bibles to John 11 and we’ll see how the story unfolds.



A Request for Help (John 11:1-16, NLT)

It starts with a request for help.

The Raising of Lazarus

A man named Lazarus was sick. He lived in Bethany with his sisters, Mary and Martha. ² This is the Mary who later poured the expensive perfume on the Lord’s feet and wiped them with her hair [John 12]. Her brother, Lazarus, was sick. ³ So the two sisters sent a message to Jesus telling him, “Lord, your dear friend is very sick.”

⁴ But when Jesus heard about it he said, “Lazarus’s sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this.” ⁵ So although Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, ⁶ he stayed where he was for the next two days. ⁷ Finally, he said to his disciples, “Let’s go back to Judea.”

⁸ But his disciples objected. “Rabbi,” they said, “only a few days ago the people in Judea were trying to stone you. Are you going there again?”

⁹ Jesus replied, “There are twelve hours of daylight every day. During the day people can walk safely. They can see because they have the light of this world. ¹⁰ But at night there is danger of stumbling because they have no light.” ¹¹ Then he said, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but now I will go and wake him up.”

¹² The disciples said, “Lord, if he is sleeping, he will soon get better!” ¹³ They thought Jesus meant Lazarus was simply sleeping, but Jesus meant Lazarus had died.

¹⁴ So he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ And for your sakes, I’m glad I wasn’t there, for now you will really believe. Come, let’s go see him.”

¹⁶ Thomas, nicknamed the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let’s go, too—and die with Jesus.”

A Friend in Trouble



As John starts this story, he takes us to where Jesus is – across the Jordan River, about a day’s journey away from the town of Bethany. Jesus gets a message that his good friends are facing a crisis.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are siblings who live in Bethany. Jesus has been at their place before (see Luke 10) and though we don’t get the full details of their relationship presented in the Gospels, it is clear these people hold a special place in His heart.

“Lord, he whom you love is ill.” (v. 3)

Lazarus is important to Jesus. But he is sick...and it is clear he has more than a case of the sniffles. This is a serious illness, worth sending people to track down Jesus. And the implication of their search is that Jesus can and should do something about it.



Many of you know the feeling. You’ve had a loved one in the hospital or in a serious accident, and you’ve been seeking help! Our calls are usually to doctors and emergency personnel, and our focus is on getting the best care. Mary and Martha have the same thoughts, but they have something we don’t have in person: they have the Great Physician on speed dial, and he’s in the area. Knowing that He has healed others, and knowing the connection they share, they trust that He can heal Lazarus.

It is with cautious optimism that they ask Jesus to hurry back to Bethany and help his friend. But Jesus doesn't respond like expected!

An Unusual Response

"Meh. Not a big deal."

That's how the first part of Jesus' response comes across. *"This illness won't lead to death,"* He says...as if it isn't all that serious or important.



As a dad, I can relate. In the past when my kids have felt a fever or complained about stomach pains, I tend to think, "Meh. Not a big deal. You'll get over it." Moms tend to be more compassionate and attentive, worrying that it might be bubonic plague or appendicitis. But me? It's fine. No blood, no foul. Rub some dirt on it.

When Jesus says, "This illness won't lead to death," I agree. Rub some dirt on it, Lazarus. You'll be okay.



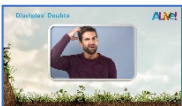
But that's not what Jesus is really saying. That's only the *first* part of his statement. He follows up with, *"No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this."* When the second half is articulated, it becomes clear that Jesus isn't downplaying Lazarus' illness; He is magnifying God's glory *in* the illness. Jesus means that illness and death will not be the end for Lazarus. Instead, God is going to do something to get the glory. It will be amazing! And it will point us to Jesus!

And so...Jesus waits.

God's timing on this requires Jesus to be patient. So, the one-day trip is put on hold. Jesus waits...one day...and another. Rather than rushing to his friend, he puts God's plan first and awaits instruction from the Father.

Finally, he says it is time. "Let's go back to Judea."

Disciples' Doubts



Jesus' disciples are always ready to go where He goes, but by this point it seems they had dismissed the journey for a couple of reasons.

1. It felt like the trip wasn't a real possibility because of Jesus' lack of urgency.
2. Jesus' last trip to the area had led to some conflict with the local religious authorities and their followers...namely, that they tried to kill him!

"Seriously? We're going back?"

Yep, Jesus says. He gives a weird answer, some proverb about daytime and nighttime. It doesn't make immediate sense to us as readers, but it is more clear when you remember He told his disciples similar things before:



“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9:4–5, ESV)

‘When we have a chance to obey the Father, we do it,’ Jesus says. ‘And now it’s time to do the Father’s work. Lazarus is asleep, so let’s go wake him up.’



The disciples respond to this in the most “disciple-y” way – the kind of response that shows them missing the point, like they do in so many gospel stories.

Disciples: “Dude, Jesus...if he is sleeping, he will wake up on his own.”

...to which Jesus has to be super blunt.

Jesus: “Guys...he’s dead!”

Disciples: “So...this Lazarus guy is dead? And the religious leaders might try to kill you when you get there?”

Jesus: “Yeah...but when we go, you’re gonna see something that will totally build your faith.”

The group grows silent, trying to wrap their heads around it. But one speaks up. Ironically, the one we nickname “Doubting Thomas” shows the most trust.

Thomas: “Cool. Let’s go die with Jesus.”

Takeaway: Near Death Points us to Jesus



As we hear the first part of the story, we are confronted with a couple of near-death situations: an illness, and a death threat. And in both cases, the impulse of the people is the same: **Go to Jesus.**

Need help? Mary and Martha go to Jesus.

In danger? Oh, well. The disciples stick with Jesus.

That’s the first takeaway. **Near death should point us to Jesus.** He is the only One with the power to fix any situation. He is the only One who cares unconditionally about us. He is the only hope we have when everything falls apart.

Ask yourself: Is he the One you go to when things fall apart? When you are faced with death (or anything approaching death), how quickly do you go to Him?

I know it is tempting to seek solace in other places...in the bottom of a bottle, in a warm embrace from a willing partner, in an endless scroll of TikTok distractions, in the bed under the covers to avoid it all. We go lots of different places when we are facing the death of a marriage, or the loss of a life we knew, or (yes) the actual death of a loved one.

But *death* is a necessary precursor to *resurrection*. And *resurrection* only happens with *Jesus*. So, when you face “near death,” why not go straight to Him?!?!



“For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:5, NLT)

Surround yourself with other people who will **point you to Him**, who will **accompany you to Him**, who will **remind you of Him**, who will **call on Him with you** whenever you face those challenges.

Make the words of Thomas your refrain. *“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”* (John 11:16, ESV)



Too Little, Too Late? (John 11:17-32, NLT)

As the story continues, we encounter some people who think Jesus’ arrival might be too little, too late.

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived at Bethany, he was told that Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was only a few miles down the road from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many of the people had come to console Martha and Mary in their loss. ²⁰ When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.”

²³ Jesus told her, “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ “Yes,” Martha said, “he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day.”

*²⁵ Jesus told her, “**I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. ²⁶ Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?**”*

²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she told him. “I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God.” ²⁸ Then she returned to Mary. She called Mary aside from the mourners and told her, “The Teacher is here and wants to see you.” ²⁹ So Mary immediately went to him.

³⁰ Jesus had stayed outside the village, at the place where Martha met him. ³¹ When the people who were at the house consoling Mary saw her leave so hastily, they assumed she was going to Lazarus’s grave to weep. So they followed her there. ³² When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

The Sisters' Claim

Martha & Mary



The first person to meet Jesus when he arrives on scene is Lazarus' sister, Martha. From descriptions in Luke 10, she is the more practical of the sisters. She is the one who typically focuses on the task at hand. She is the kind of woman who cleans the dishes now so others can use the kitchen later...and we can talk when we're done.

Maybe you have that kind of person in your life; maybe you are that person. You keep a level head and get stuff done even when it is tough.

Martha's sister, Mary, stays behind at the house with the mourners. She's clearly more emotional. She typically is less focused on tasks and more on people.

Maybe that's you; maybe you have that kind of person in your life. You'll worry about the nuts and bolts later. The dishes can wait because we have people and conversations and relationships that matter more now.

The two sisters have divergent personalities, but their response to Jesus shares a common reaction:

"Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Martha says it in the context of a rational conversation; Mary says it in an emotional heap on the ground. But they both know their claim is true. Jesus could have stopped Lazarus from dying.

Jesus' Claim

If I were Jesus, I would have been defensive. But Jesus isn't. He just moves on to the point. Lazarus is dead. But he will live again.

"Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."" (John 11:23, ESV)

Jesus: "Lazarus will rise!"

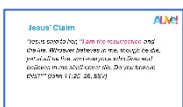
Martha: "Yeah, yeah. I know. The whole 'last day'" thing.
[Under her breath: Not much good now, though...]

Mary: (crying)

But then Jesus makes one of the big claims of this passage, of this book, of the Bible.

"Jesus said to her, "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?"" (John 11:25–26, ESV)

It's one thing to say it in a more academic setting. It's another to say it to the face of a woman wearing her funeral clothes!



Jesus has said it in other places, of course.

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.” (John 5:21, ESV)

But here there is emphasis. Jesus says, “**I am** the resurrection.” It is one of seven “I AM” sayings in the book of John – sayings that underscore the divinity of Jesus and show his connection to the Great I AM (Yahweh). It is a powerful claim!

Yet here, Martha and Mary are less concerned with theology and more concerned with the actual death they have experienced. They had expressed confidence in Jesus to heal Lazarus while he was alive. Would they still trust now that Lazarus was dead?

Takeaway: Actual Death Points us to Jesus



As we hear the second part of the story, we are confronted with an actual death. Here are the mourners, deep in grief. Here is a hopeless situation.

And now that Jesus is present, the question for them and for us is, “Do you believe?”

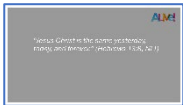
Do we put limits on the power of Jesus? Do we trust him...up to a point? Or do we trust Him fully?

Remember what it says in Hebrews 13:8.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8, NLT)

The same Jesus who will defeat death and rule for eternity is the same Jesus who meets us here in our darkest moments. Do you believe that He can make a difference now? Do you believe that He can bring hope into a hopeless situation? Do you believe that He can bring the dead to life?

Fill your brain with reminders of this power so you can trust it when all hope seems lost...when death looks like it has won. Actual death should drive us to Jesus.



Movement! (John 11:33-44, NLT)

As the story reaches its apex, we find that trusting Jesus is worth it! There is movement!

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled.

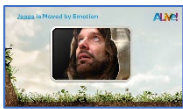
³⁴ “Where have you put him?” he asked them.

They told him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Then Jesus wept. ³⁶ The people who were standing nearby said, “See how much he loved him!” ³⁷ But some said, “This man healed a blind man. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?”

³⁸ Jesus was still angry as he arrived at the tomb, a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance. ³⁹ *“Roll the stone aside,”* Jesus told them.

But Martha, the dead man’s sister, protested, “Lord, he has been dead for four days. The smell will be terrible.”

⁴⁰ Jesus responded, *“Didn’t I tell you that you would see God’s glory if you believe?”* ⁴¹ So they rolled the stone aside. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, *“Father, thank you for hearing me.* ⁴² *You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me.”* ⁴³ Then Jesus shouted, *“Lazarus, come out!”* ⁴⁴ And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, *“Unwrap him and let him go!”*



Jesus is Moved by Emotion

The emotions of Mary, Martha, and the other mourners touch Jesus’ heart. He gets moved by emotion.

Note: I don’t love the translation “Jesus was angry” here. The Greek word has the sense of scolding or sternly warning. Here, it is like scolding or rebuking one’s own spirit. Jesus is forcefully curbing his own emotions. He’s not mad at the crowd...though he might be mad at death.

Jesus is so moved that he cries (and millions of kids rejoice that they have a Bible verse memorized – John 11:35). But he doesn’t stay there.

Jesus goes to the tomb.



The Stone is Moved by Family

Jesus then gives the command: move the stone.

Practical Martha reminds him that it’s been four days. He’s not only *merely* dead...Lazarus is *really most sincerely* dead!¹ But after reassurance from Jesus, they acquiesce.

The stone is moved by the family.



Lazarus is Moved by God

And then Jesus prays:

“Father, thank you for hearing me. You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me.”

¹ Yes, I lifted a line from *The Wizard of Oz* (“Ding Dong the Witch is Dead”)

He does not ask God to raise Lazarus; instead, Jesus thanks him for having already answered. So great was Jesus' faith in the Father that he assumed this miracle ... to be as good as done.²

And His faith in God is validated, because as soon as Jesus calls out, here comes a very-much-alive Lazarus, moved by God! Resurrection is so fresh that he is still wrapped up in his burial shroud, looking like a bad Halloween costume!

Who could have seen this coming?

Takeaway: Victory Over Death Points us to Jesus

Oh, yeah... six chapters earlier...Jesus might have known about this.



“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”
(John 5:25–29, ESV)

All he does is win!

We should always be going to Jesus...when life is getting hard (near-death) or when you've hit rock bottom (actual death) or when you're ready to get up (dead, yet alive again!).

In this series, we've discovered big truths about resurrection:

- Life comes from God!
- Resurrection is not about us!
- Resurrection is our hope!

But this is the bottom line. **Victory over death points us to Jesus.**

Lazarus reminds us that if you want victory over death, it comes from one source.
Resurrection points us to Jesus.

This will be made evident for every resurrected person at His return, as Paul shares in Philippians 2. No one will get up on their own. It will be at His command, and He will get the glory...whether people expected it or not!

“Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

² Tenney, M. C. (1981). [John](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts* (Vol. 9, p. 121). Zondervan Publishing House.

in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9–11, NLT)

Victory over death points us to Jesus.

If we want any hope for the future, we need Jesus!!! So, verify with yourself: have you trusted Him for it? Have you gone to Him yet? Have you accepted Him as your Lord and Savior?

Don't wait for a graveside wakeup call. Get ready for resurrection *now*.



Closing

That's John 11 and the story of Lazarus. The stage was large in this story. The timing was right. The impact was profound.

But don't pay attention to the dead guy.

His *near death* pointed us to Jesus. His *actual* death pointed us to Jesus. His *victory over death* pointed us to Jesus.

The star of Lazarus' resurrection wasn't Lazarus. It was Jesus.

And if you want a resurrection story worth telling, He needs to be the star of your story, too!

Prayer

Invitation

Give Jesus the attention this morning!

If you have something this morning you would like us to pray to Him for, we invite you to come forward to share it...a spiritual request, a healing, a transformation.

Or if you want to prepare for resurrection by trusting Jesus as your Lord and Savior, come forward and share that decision (or start the conversation).

We just want to point you to Jesus as we stand and as we sing!

PRAYER REQUESTS:

Notes

A Request for Help (John 11:1-16)

A Friend in Trouble

An Unusual Response

Disciples' Doubts (John 9:4-5)

Takeaway: Near Death Points us to Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:5)

Too Little, Too Late? (John 11:17-32)

The Sisters' Claim (John 11:21, 32)

Jesus' Claim (John 11:23, 25-26; John 5:21)

Takeaway: Actual Death Points us to Jesus (Hebrews 13:8)

Movement! (John 11:33-44)

Jesus is Moved by Emotion

The Stone is Moved by Family

Lazarus is Moved by God

*Takeaway: Victory Over Death Points us to Jesus
(John 5:25-29, Philippians 2:9-11)*

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Did your home church ever celebrate Palm Sunday? How?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Read John 12:9-19. The miracle involving Lazarus was instrumental to the popularity of Jesus as He triumphantly entered Jerusalem. If you were in the crowd, what is a slogan you might chant to highlight this connection?
- Jesus was friends with Lazarus. How hard do you think it was for Him to wait and not intervene, knowing that He had the power to do so? How does that impact the way you think He feels about your own painful challenges in life?
- Read John 11:4. What was the focus of Jesus waiting? In what ways did God get glory from the miracle? In what ways did Jesus get glory from it?
- Compare and contrast the reactions of Martha and Mary as Jesus arrives. How would they be similar to or different from your own reactions?
- Read John 11:25-26. What percent of people you know would trust Jesus' description of himself? For those who wouldn't, what stops them?
- The sisters trusted Jesus to heal but not necessarily resurrect. Do you ever put limits on the power of Jesus? What does full trust look like?
- List three words that show Jesus' emotion in John 11:33-35. Explain the emotions considering what you know about Jesus' power.
- Imagine you are Lazarus. Describe the scene from his perspective. At what moment does he arise? What does he hear, see, feel, think? How did it impact his view of Jesus?

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Pray that God will help Jesus be the focus of your story, and that He will be the hope you have after death.