

The Gifts of Jesus: Life

a sermon

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John 11:1-45

It must have seemed hopeless.

They had hoped that their brother, Lazarus, would get better.

They had hoped that their friend, Jesus, would get there in time.

They had hoped, and hoped, and then their hopes were dashed.

And now Martha and Mary grieved for their brother, their *dead* brother, their brother for whom they now had no hope.

Because there was no longer any hope. Hope was now irrelevant. Now it was a matter of burial, of mourning, of looking back on a past that truly had passed, of knowing that things would no longer be the same.

As Martha and Mary saw things, it really was over. Their brother was gone, never to be seen again in this life. To remember him only as a loved one from the past, and in the present no longer to share with him, no longer to laugh with him, no longer to work and play with him — that was now how things would be.

And they knew it. Not hope, but despair, or at least sorrow, would mark their days, for quite some time anyway, as the pain eventually would become less acute and morph into a dull ache of perpetual loss, still painful, but bearable.



When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days.

Now, that's not kind of dead. It's not mostly dead. That's really dead! The common belief then was that the soul of a dead person hovered around the body for three days, but after that there was no going back.

With Lazarus, it was four days. Too late. Way too late. Truly, Lazarus was gone. For Jesus to arrive now would be only so he could pay his respects.

That would be nice. They'd like that.

And it would nice for him to be near the sisters in solidarity with their grief.

They'd like that, too.

And it would be nice for him to offer what words of comfort he could in this difficult time. I'm sure they'd appreciate that very much.

When Martha sees him, she greets him with words full of pain and tinged with accusation: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Then with a smidgen of faith and a gesture of forgiveness, she offers this: "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

She's right, but more than she understands.

“Your brother will rise again,” Jesus tells her. “I know that, Lord,” she replies, thinking that he is giving her one of those trite clichés offered to the bereaved in their time of loss, like “He’s in a better place” or “I guess it was his time to go.”

(Here’s a helpful hint: when you are with someone who has just lost a loved one, don’t say that. Just don’t.)

So Martha hangs in there, and says, “I know, Lord. I know he will rise ... at the resurrection on the last day.” “Ah,” says Jesus, “but I, *I myself* am the resurrection, as I am the life, and to those who believe in me I will give life, eternal life.”

Soon Jesus goes to where Lazarus is buried, to the tomb. And let’s understand what the tomb really is, what it really *means*. It is:

that place of finality,
that place of ending,
that place where all is past tense,
all is memory and recollection,
that place absent all anticipation and hope and shared today’s and tomorrow’s.

He goes to the tomb, and at first he is moved to tears — angered, even —

by the mania of despair that cruelly grips the world,
by the diabolical power of death to ruin and tear apart.

He doesn’t dismiss these. He takes death seriously. And it moves him.

And then, wiping away his tears, Jesus prays, lifting his eyes upward, and he thanks God for having already heard him even before he says a word, for answering his prayer even before he prays it. He thanks his Father in advance for this answered prayer. And having prayed, Jesus walks up to the tomb.

He stands there,

full of power,
full of mercy,
full of love,
full of *life*.

He raises his voice and commands Lazarus to come out. And against all expectations, the occupant of that house of death answers Christ’s command, and walks out, no longer dead, no longer imprisoned by death, but alive because of the gift Jesus has given him.



With this, we see another one of the Lord Jesus’ special gifts. And that is the gift of life. Jesus gives life, and brings hope. He destroys death, and removes the curse. That is his gift.

Jesus can give this gift, he can give life, because he himself *is* life, the resurrection and the life. “I *am*,” he says, “the resurrection and the life.”

Martha thought of the resurrection (and maybe some of us do, too) as something entirely in the distant future, what some call “the general resurrection,” when at the end of time the

dead who are blessed will be raised by God. And so when Jesus says that Lazarus will rise, she thinks he means something down the road for Lazarus, a distant hope.

But Jesus tells Martha, and then shows her, that the resurrection is not only “then.” It’s also “now.” It’s not only future but also present. And that’s because Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life.

For us who by faith live in Jesus Christ, resurrection has happened and continues to happen again and again. Because Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life. We who believe in Christ are being raised to new life even in the here and now. We experience in our todays the gift of life and the destruction of death. We feel eternal life making its way into the present.

Because of that, I wonder how I should answer when I’m asked “when were you saved?” or “when were you born again?”

Frankly, I think these are not very good questions.

Sure, I understand what people are wanting to know when they ask these things. They’re wanting me to share my story of faith in Jesus. And I appreciate that. I really do.

But we who believe in Jesus are always being saved, always being converted, continually being born again. Once it begins, it’s always happening to us and in us. It is both complete and being fulfilled. It’s never entirely in our past, nor completely in our future. We who believe in Jesus and strive to follow him, who by numerous miracles big and small *do* manage to follow him, are experiencing conversion and new birth and resurrection *every single day*.

Jesus stood before Lazarus’ tomb and called to him, “Lazarus, come out.” And Lazarus came out.

And so he does even today. Jesus stands before *our* tombs:

tombs of hopelessness and despair,
graves of emptiness and hunger,
crypts of regret and shame,
caskets of hatred and greed.

He stands there,

full of power,
full of mercy,
full of love,
full of *life*.

And he raises his voice, to summon *us* out of *our* graves. He commands us to leave behind death, for it no longer binds us. He gives us his gift, the gift of life, new life, life physical and eternal, life filled with

hope and joy,
freshness and possibility,
forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus calls, and the dead walk from their graves. He does this again and again. *Every day* he does it, an ongoing raising of the dead to new life. Because that is his gift.

It’s a gift, I tell you, to greet a new day with prayer confessing yesterday’s failures and embracing Christ’s renewing forgiveness, and every morning to see that Jesus has taken yesterday from our grip, forgiven it, and given us back a new day.

It's a gift, I tell you, to pray with the ill and with the physically dying, and to share in common with them the peace and hope and assurance of Christ's gift of eternal life.

It's a gift, I tell you, to follow Jesus with restored living, to join him in his work,

loving the loveless,
befriending the friendless,
welcoming the unwelcome.

It's a gift, I tell you, to be unexpectedly reconciled, as I was last week, with a friend whose friendship had been broken, and to know that the reconciliation was the resurrecting power of Jesus.

It's a gift, I tell you, to hear Christ's resurrecting call

to follow him,
and obey him,
to accept his forgiveness,
and to forgive others,
to see
and know
and celebrate
his gift of new life.

My friends, I urge you to seek and welcome Christ's gift of new life every day, making it visible in your lives, to the glory of God.