

February 10, 2019
Tomorrow Never Dies
John 11:1-44

This morning we're taking about trivial things: just life and death. ☺

The storyline is simple enough. Mary and Martha send word to Jesus, who is some distance away, that their brother Lazarus is very sick ... in fact within hours he will die. This is a family with which Jesus had a close relationship. But Jesus waits **days** before starting off to visit and by the time he gets there Lazarus has already been buried for four days. And Jesus promptly raises him from the dead. What's it all about?!

Jesus has already demonstrated God's power over physical illness, mental illness and demon possession but the real challenge to His power is death itself. If Jesus can't do anything about death then whatever else He can do amounts to nothing. The great enemy remains triumphant in the end.

Of course we don't like to talk about death. And I don't want to dwell on it this morning. But we have to accept it as a reality. Denial doesn't work. C.S. Lewis, when his wife, Joy, died, wrote this: *"It is hard to have patience with people who say 'There is no death' or 'Death doesn't matter.' There is death. And whatever else, it matters ... You might as well say that birth doesn't matter."* (*A Grief Observed*, p.16)

But it is very significant that in the presence of death, Jesus still talks about life. And it's that hope – that Good News of life-in-the-face-of-death we will talk about today.

1. What is Death?

First, we need to ask, "What is death?" Is it a natural part of life? Is it a part of God's perfect plan for us? How would you answer that? Death is not natural. It never was part of God's plan for people (see Genesis 1-2). Death is *"an alien intrusion into God's good world"* (John Stott). It was never God's plan. God seems to have intended for us, who are created in His image, a more noble future. A future more like the "translation" Enoch or Elijah experienced, or the "transformation" which will take place in those alive when Christ returns (see Genesis 5:24, 2 Kings 2:1-11, 1 Corinthians 15:50-54).

How did Jesus react in the presence of death? Jesus groaned (v.33) and wept (v.35) as he approached Lazarus' tomb. He does not accept death as the way things ought to be. He laments it. He weeps out of a profound sense of loss and anger. His tears reflect the tragedy of death. It's OK to be angry in the presence of death. We ought to be upset about it. Jesus is. And Jesus understands how we feel.

So where does death come from? The Bible talks about life and death in two ways. The first is physical and the second spiritual. Initially, Adam and Eve have both physical and spiritual life. The hint of Genesis 1-2 seems to be that death wasn't part of the plan ...

until they disobeyed God. Death, both physical and spiritual, came as the consequence of disobeying God (sin). That's just the way it is. Because of that sin our physical bodies became subject to destructive forces. And because of that sin, our natures are tainted as well: most of us are not consciously evil, but we are imperfect. And the consequence is we are separated from God – spiritual death.

2. What do we do about Death?

Jesus emphasizes that death was never part of God's plan. But what is He going to do about it? When He weeps, folks assume He is simply crying out of grief. When He suggests moving the stone in front of the tomb, everyone protests. Jewish tradition insisted a dead person's spirit lingered for three days after death, but after four days, a person was good and dead. And it would smell really bad.

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."* It's a testimony to Jesus' authority they do actually move the stone. And when they do, they discover a miracle. He is the resurrection. He is the life. He proves it. Emphatically.

What does it all mean? Certainly people still die physically. What is the Good News? Is resurrection a reality? Or a myth? First, Jesus is emphasizing that resurrection is real (see 1 Corinthians 15 for more.). He has power even over death itself.

Second, Jesus emphasizes that resurrection is physical. It is not some esoteric experience where our disembodied souls whisk off to heaven. What Jesus demonstrates with Lazarus is the reality that even though our bodies may die, they will be raised. They will be recognizable. Our assurance is that we will be raised with perfected and glorified forms that will not be subject to the same diseases and infirmities that these bodies are (see 1 Corinthians 15:35-57). Only poor Lazarus. He just got his old body back but he would have to die all over again. *"How awful it must have been for poor Lazarus who had actually died, got it all over, and then was brought back to go through it all, I suppose, a few years later. I think he, not St. Stephen, ought really to be celebrated as the first martyr"* (C.S. Lewis).

Scripture tells us we live in an age with two worlds side by side: one, this visible world, is so scarred and troubled it is slowly ticking down, like some great machine, exhausted and plagued by crippling aches and pains, the old cogs and pistons are wearing down and seizing up ... slowly, but relentlessly and inevitably, our world is wearing out. But here is the miracle, a whole new world, a perfect world, with no war, no pain, no death, has begun and, as our familiar old world ticks out its final time, this new world, the kingdom of God, is just winding up ...

The last words of Edward the Confessor, a devout early King of England (1003-1066), were: *"Do not weep for me. I shall not die; and as I leave the land of the dying I trust to see the blessings of the Lord in the land of the living."* We call this world the *"land of the living"* but if you think about in eternal terms, you could call it *"the land of the*

dying." That's not be discouraging or disparage of life here and now. But it is to be realistic and full of hope about what comes afterwards. This life, here and now, is nothing compared to what comes after.

In the face of his wife's death, C.S. Lewis reflects, *"Why am I so afraid? ... Around every door I hear your voice say to me, 'This is only the land of shadows. Real life hasn't begun yet.'"*

The last words of Lewis' famous series about Narnia are these, spoken by Aslan, a lion (who represents Jesus): *"There was a **real** railway accident,' said Aslan softly. 'Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The (school) term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.' And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."*

In a very real way, "tomorrow never dies."

3. What do we do about Life?

If this isn't so much the land of the living, but the land of the dying, how then should we live? Jesus says, *"I am the resurrection and the life"*; we grasp the "resurrection" part, but what about the "life" part? Note he does NOT say, "I **am** the resurrection; I **will be** the life" (future tense). He DOES say, I **am** the life (present tense) right here, right now.

We usually see resurrection only in life-after-death terms. So we can feel life here on Earth becomes meaningless ... real life is all about the future with Jesus, and a bit otherworldly. Or, we can feel resurrection is such an unimaginable experience that our faith seems to have no relevance to our lives, here and now. Surely, we can argue, this statement (*"I am the resurrection and the life"*) belongs nicely at funerals, but otherwise we ignore it. But that misses Jesus' point.

Resurrection happens at two levels. One is a physical resurrection – it happens one-day, someday. The other resurrection is spiritual. It happens the instant we accept Jesus as our Saviour. What Jesus is saying at the spiritual level is that *"Even if you feel dead in sin; even if you feel like you have lost all that makes life worth the living; even if you feel separated from God ... I can make you alive again – today."* In point of fact this is true in life after life through history. When God comes into a life, someone new is born. That's why John 3 uses the image of being "born again." A spiritual life is born where once there was nothing at all.

"Do not lose heart," writes Paul, *"Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly*

we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). Yes, our physical bodies wear down, but our spiritual life is just winding up, till one day, some day, we are with Jesus.

Then why are we sometimes spiritually miserable? It is very possible to be saved by Jesus, and still not experience this new life. Each of us who has accepted Jesus as our Saviour has God's Holy Spirit within us. But we can choose to allow Him to work within us – giving us God's joy, peace, hope, and love – or not. God's will for us is that the power of the resurrection be in us, giving us new life (Philippians 3:10, Ephesians 1:15-23). But will we allow that power to move in us?

If we don't let the Holy Spirit shape our hearts, minds, and souls, if we don't let Him into our lives, then technically we are resurrected (we have salvation in Jesus) and we will have "life-after-death eternal life," but that's it. Only when we let Jesus in to change us do we experience His inward renewal and new life right now, too.

Tony Campolo argues that the number one problem among North Americans is not so much that we are evil, but that we're dead. He talks of getting on an elevator in a mega skyscraper in New York with a bunch of "dead" people (no one would talk). He turned to face the other people and said, "We'll be traveling together for quite a while, so why don't we sing?" And the people were so intimidated, they sang. His point is, most of us are the "living dead"; we go through the motions of existence, but there's no passion, no purpose, no meaning. Instead, he argues, we need to be the "living" ...those who know that life is so much more, because we live it day-by-day with Jesus, as those who have a living hope for today and the future.

We are citizens of this world that we see – Jesus can give us new life here and now. But remember this is only the shadow of a world much greater and grander than we can imagine. We who believe are also citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. We are called to see beyond the horizons of this world and see that our real security, our real joy, and our real hope – our real lives do not lie in this world, but beyond.

When Jesus says, "*I am the resurrection and the life,*" He is inviting you to be part of a Great Story that goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.

I have to disagree with C.S. Lewis ... Chapter One *has* begun. The first line is, "*It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.*" Is that where it will end, for you, until the physical resurrection?

Or will you allow the Holy Spirit to make His power – resurrection power – so alive in you today, that the Great Story is being written in your life, even as we speak?

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