

THE SHOUT HEARD ROUND THE WORLD - THE COMMAND OF CHRIST AND THE SEEMINGLY UNBREAKABLE STRONGHOLD OF DEATH

John 11:28-44 - "When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." [29] And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. [30] Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. [31] When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. [32] Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." [33] When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. [34] And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." [35] Jesus wept. [36] So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" [37] But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" [38] Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. [39] Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." [40] Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" [41] So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. [42] I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." [43] When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." [44] The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

I had it in my mind to present this text and teaching on Easter Sunday. And a big part of this message will be explaining why I deliberately changed my mind. There is a sense in which this is very much an Easter text and there is another very important sense in which it is not. That was a fresh point of awareness to me and I hope I can make it to be such for you. More about that in a minute.

I think there is a reason this text - this *seventh sign* in John's account - has such a power to draw our affection and attention. We live in a world where most of our dealings with death are *religious* in nature. They take place in chapels, churches, tear-filled hospital rooms, and, at least for Christians, observations made from Bible passages.

And what all of these have in common is they're a few degrees removed from the actual *fact and finality of death*. These are all our places and means of *coping* with death and sometimes *preparing* for death. They help us as we *mourn* the sting of death. And they all call for *faith* in a victory we don't actually see yet.

But everything is stripped away in John chapter 11. This isn't a sermon or church service. This isn't a book or discussion about death or a movie about *near* death. This is Jesus going to where death lives. This is Jesus, who claims to be the resurrection and the life, going straight to the *grave*. The prayers and lunches and memorials and services are all over. We are told bluntly, in no uncertain terms, that the corpse of Lazarus stinks. It's not pretty. But that's what *real* death is like.

Religious talk about death is rampant. Some see death simply as the final end. Some hope for reincarnation. There's endless talk about tunnels and bright lights. And with dozens of different religions all claiming different things faith can be confused or misplaced. But *this* - this is Jesus *taking death on* - in front of everyone. They both can't win. And the battle is as stark and real as any could be before Jesus' *own* death and resurrection.

So we are on very exciting ground today. Jesus is *confronting* death in this text. I believe that's the reason He tells this doubting family (no doubt with help from friends) to take the stone away *themselves* - John 11:39 - "Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.'"

The removal of the stone forces Martha to confront her worst fears and doubts. There's a rotting corpse behind that stone and there's no turning back once they start moving that stone. Jesus *forces* her to commit herself. The stone was supernaturally *rolled away* at Jesus' resurrection. But Jesus isn't just out to raise Lazarus' *body*. He's out to raise the *faith* of those gathered at the grave - 11:40 - "Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that *if you believed* you would see the glory of God?'"

1) THERE IS NO GREATER CHALLENGE TO FAITH IN CHRIST THAN THE FACT OF PHYSICAL DEATH

John 11:28-32 - "When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is

calling for you." [29] And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. [30] Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. [31] When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. [32] Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'"

Mary's words are an exact repetition of Martha's - John 11:21 - "Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'"

Don't miss what's being said here. Death **tries** our faith like nothing else. Both sisters are confident to express their disappointment that Jesus didn't arrive until **after** Lazarus died. In other words, they are both confident that **if only** Jesus had come **before** Lazarus actually died Jesus could and would have healed him. **Sickness** was not the obstacle. **Death** was.

That's really the point of this passage. Other religions can rest on mysticism or sentimentality, but Christianity cannot. If Jesus can deal with every point of our fallenness **but** death we can never live with hope. All will be dashed at last. Death finally wins and we finally lose.

It is only in the conquering of death that we have any hope at all. And we should all be eternally grateful for the rugged honesty of the Apostle Paul for **saying so** - 1 Corinthians 15:14 & 19 - "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain....[19]....If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."

Don't miss the ground-breaking truth of that nineteenth verse - "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." Paul isn't writing of atheists here. He's talking about a **hypothetical** situation that many in today's world imagine is the **real** situation. He's imagining a Christianity that majors only on this present earthly existence. He's imagining the very commonly held view of a faith that does everything **brilliantly** on this earthly side of things.

Picture a faith that so transformed our earthly desires that we Christians all give away most of our wealth to feed the poor and needy. Picture a faith that eliminates all greed and war. Imagine a Christian faith that so changes the moral climate of this age that there is no longer any pornography or sexual immorality. All marriages are Biblical and permanent. No children ever get kidnaped or hooked on drugs.

That's the kind of situation Paul is picturing. Everything runs exactly as it should. But if "**in Christ**" we have this burning hope "**in this life only**" - if we only get in Christianity a moral bump-up in the human race that replaces the progress of evolutionary development where people are just a whole lot better than they **used** to be - then Paul says we are all **pitiful** and **pathetic**. We need a **much more robust victory than that**. Any moral wins that just get snuffed out in death aren't wins at all.

## 2) BEWARE THE HOLD UNBELIEF CAN GET ON THE MIND

John 11:33-37 - "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. [34] And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." [35] Jesus wept. [36] So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" [37] But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Do you see what's happening in this strange text? You're looking at a group of people who **recognize** that Jesus healed a blind man and use that as an argument **against** accepting Jesus for who He is. This is the convoluted affect of unbelief. The power of Jesus to open the eyes of the blind is used to reinforce their anger **against** Jesus for **not** healing Lazarus. In other words, no matter what Jesus did, there would never be **enough** miracles to change their hearts.

"**He could have done more than He did!**" That's their position. In other words, as the growing power of unbelief hardens the heart there is nothing that will lead them to anything other than **criticism** of Jesus. And we remember Jesus' words again in John 9:39 - "Jesus said, 'For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.'"

## 3) WHY JESUS PRAYED OUT LOUD AT THE GRAVE OF LAZARUS

John 11:40-42 - "Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?' [41] So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. [42] I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me'"

Here we have something very unique in the gospels. Jesus unashamedly admits how desperately He wants people to **believe**

in His unique redemptive mission from His Father. One gets the feeling that He would do absolutely anything to draw out such belief. No one on earth wants you to believe in Jesus as much as **Jesus** wants you to believe in Jesus.

Once the whole miracle of Lazarus is seen in its total context this is the whole motive behind Jesus' delay in coming in the first place - **John 11:3-4, 14-15** - "So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." [4] But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it...[14]....Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, [15] and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

**Question:** What gives more pleasure to Jesus than raising Lazarus from the dead? **Answer:** Seeing more and more people believe in His sent redemptive mission from the Father.

#### 4) WHY THIS MAY NOT BE A GREAT EASTER TEXT

**John 11:43-44** - "When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.' [44] The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'"

As far as we know, Lazarus died again, though I'm sure with much more confidence and less fear the second time! And the point we should keep in our minds is this text records a **resurrection** without a **new creation**. The miracle of the raising of Lazarus is a miracle of the **reversal of decay** in the body of Lazarus. And it's a renewal of fellowship **temporarily** with his loved ones in Bethany.

This is a **reversal** of death. It is not a permanent **victory** over death. And there's a great, profound, wonderful-beyond-telling theological reason for that in the Scriptures:

**2 Timothy 1:8-10** - "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, [9] who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, [10] and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel...."

The risen body of Jesus was completely different from the risen body of Lazarus. Jesus' physical body was a **new creation**. That's what Paul meant when he said Jesus "....brought....immortality to light through the gospel...." The resurrection of Jesus spells the **end** of death in the way the resurrection of Lazarus never did. In the resurrection of Lazarus we see a **reversal** of death. In the resurrection of Jesus we see the **abolishing** of death. What a joyous difference!

#### 5) THE SHOUT HEARD AROUND THE WORLD

**John 11:43-44** - "....he [Jesus] cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.' [44] The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'"

To this day death always **looks** like it wins. We're left rather silent and accepting for now. There is something so powerfully moving in the way the apparently **invincible power of the grave** is brought to kneel at the **bare command of Jesus**. He simply commands. He speaks and death must heel. This is the authority before which all other leaders, teachers, religions and prophets pale.

The text is silent on my next thoughts. Lazarus is dead. His ears don't work. Jesus doesn't shout to overcome deafness. I believe this is a **teaching shout**. I believe Jesus deliberately wants this shout to model another shout coming:

**John 5:24-28** - "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. [25] "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. [26] For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. [27] And he has given him authority to execute judgment,

**because he is the Son of Man. [28] Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice...."**

This world has never seen anything like this. I'm convinced John included this account in his gospel because, just as Jesus wanted those first witnesses to come to **believe** in Him, John wanted all who read this great account to put two and two together. Jesus' command is stronger than the invincible appearance of death. Live in that light and in that hope.

I don't know what kind of week you just had. I don't know whether you feel like the bug or the windshield. But this text wants to speak into your heart. There is nothing - **nothing** - that can cancel out or ever take away your ultimate triumph and hope in Christ Jesus. Take that home with you from church today.