

### John 11:17-37

We are continuing this morning in our study of the Gospel of John, picking up at verse 17 of chapter 11, and working through to verse 37 of the same chapter. The portion of Scripture we are focusing on this morning is a small piece of a larger section dealing with the account of Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead. Now, as we saw last week, one could teach the entire story in one hit - and that would be a perfectly legitimate approach to take.

However, in doing so, you would necessarily have to move right past a number of important minor themes and observations in order to get to the main theme, simply because there would not be enough time to do much more than that. And so, as an alternative approach I have elected to break the larger story up into a number of constituent parts, stopping along the way to pick up both major and minor themes and to hold them up to the light in order that we might see what we can learn from them.

Now this passage is part of the larger sweep of verses that run from chapter one all the way up through chapter 12, and which are intended to paint a clear picture of who Jesus is and what he is all about. And then that larger section has a place in the overall purpose of the letter, which was written so that, through reading it, people might come to believe that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God, and the Savior of Sinners, and that by trusting in him they might have life in his name.

And so, with that purpose in mind, John has moved steadily on this path of revealing and confronting his readers with the identity of Jesus. And, along with all of that, and in the course of revealing this unique identity of Jesus, John has also shown his readers the *effect* of Jesus' self-revelation on those around him. Some of them have embraced him as the Messiah and others - especially the majority of the religious leaders in that day - have rejected him.

And so, over time, we have seen an initial aggravation with Jesus turn into a deep hatred which has given birth to a murderous plot to have him done away with. The religious authorities are no longer willing to tolerate Jesus. They see him as a threat to their people, their position, and even to the security of their country.

Their determination to put a stop to Jesus, while having already reached a point of no return, has been, and will be, thrown into an even higher gear with the performance of Jesus' last two signs. Both his healing of a man born blind in chapter 9, and now his raising of a man from the dead, in chapter 11, both of these point even more obviously to his divinity and his power and, as a result, make the Jewish leadership's opposition to him seem more and more ridiculous.

Now, last week, in our first look at the story of Lazarus, we focused on the first 16 verses of chapter 11. There we saw Jesus' friends approach him with news of Lazarus' serious illness. And then we saw Jesus' *response* to that - which was this interesting combination of sincere love and concern for his friends and yet, at the same time, a love that submitted to an overarching, deep, and unswerving commitment to his Father's honor and glory.

Indeed, it was because of his commitment to his Father that we saw him make what surely must have seemed to be a very surprising decision to his much-loved friends: a decision to not leave straight away to go to Lazarus but, instead, to wait two days before then setting out to see him. The major factor in that decision was Jesus' commitment to the glory of God above all else, even if the price tag for that glory meant that he might be misunderstood and that his friends might be allowed to know real pain and hardship - for a time - although not for all time.

The other thing we took notice of last week was the way that Jesus used the language of sleep to refer to Lazarus' death and the great comfort that that is for God's people because of the reality that it points to - that all of those for whom Christ died will "awake" from the temporary "sleep" that our deaths will ultimately prove to be. In other words, the story of Lazarus is a picture of how our own stories will turn out.

In the verses before us this morning, we pick up the story at verse 17 where Jesus and company, after getting the news about Lazarus, and after waiting for 2 days, and *after* setting out for Bethany, are just pulling into town.....

(Read and pray)

Jesus arrives in town, and upon doing so, heads straight to where Lazarus was. John tells us that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days - in other words he's not just dead, he's good and dead. This is not just a swoon, a temporary loss of consciousness, a coma - none of that. This is not like that scene in *The Princess Bride* where Billy Crystal's character announces that the hero of the story is not completely dead but is "mostly dead". That is not Lazarus' situation. He is really, truly, all-over-but-the-crying, *dead*.

Or so it would seem.

Now, the writer also tells us at this point that Lazarus' home town - Bethany - was very near Jerusalem which meant, among other things, that Jesus was in a place that was dangerous for him to be in, with so many enemies near by, only a couple hours away. But the fact that they were in Bethany also meant that a lot of people were in a position to come to this particular funeral - and apparently a lot did. This was probably a result of Lazarus' wealth, and perhaps also simply because he was well liked. Whatever the case, the scene that Jesus walks into is a dangerous, crowded and emotional one.

Martha, upon learning of his arrival, heads off straight away to see Jesus which, given what we know about Martha and Mary, is a little surprising in that the one you would *expect* to rush off to see Jesus straight away is *Mary*. Right? She is the one who, in the Gospel of Luke at least, is shown to be sitting devotedly at Jesus' feet, hanging on his every word, while Martha is busy getting the house in order. They are two very different personalities - and they respond to Jesus in two different ways.

And so, somewhat surprisingly, it IS Martha who is reported as having gone out to see Jesus straight away while Mary, just as surprisingly, "... remained seated in the house."

Now, there are certainly a number of possible explanations for Mary's behavior here. Perhaps she is so stricken with grief that she can't move. Perhaps she has some official responsibility to remain at home while guests are there- although she later gets up and leaves the home so that's not likely to be correct. Perhaps, for whatever reason, Martha learned of Jesus' arrival before her and took off before passing on the information to Mary. Those are all possibilities, some more remote than others.

But the writer seems to be making a point here. He records this simple, small detail - that Mary remained seated in the house. This one who, on a previous occasion, could not be pried from Jesus' side with a crowbar, on this occasion remained seated in the house.

I think that John wants us to take notice of this. And I think that he wants us to see here a Mary who did not go straight away to Jesus because, judging from her comments and emotion a few verses further on, she was *disappointed* with Jesus. Why? Because she expected other things of him. Because she thought that he would have done things differently than he did. And I think that her disappointment and confusion led to her initial reaction to Jesus' arrival - not knowing whether to go to him - or stay where she was, not knowing whether at this point it would make any difference. What could he do now? Four whole days have gone by.

Well, while Mary sits, Martha goes up to Jesus and, right off the bat, without exchanging any pleasantries, without thanking him for coming - without any of that sort of thing - Martha says, right out of the blocks, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Now, the commentators are divided on the issue of whether Martha is implying anything with this statement, or if she is mildly rebuking Jesus for not getting there any quicker. Some say she IS doing this. Others say she isn't doing it, she isn't implying or suggesting anything here - she is simply stating a fact.

But, if she *isn't* trying to make a point, then it seems a strange sort of opening comment to make to Jesus. Especially for Martha. Martha is Miss Hospitality. She is the consummate hostess. Why would she say such a thing if there was not something there behind it?

And you have to remember, Martha has been expecting Jesus for at least two days now. I talked about the whole timeline of this story last week, so I won't go back through all of that. But you might remember me saying that, if Jesus had left as soon as he received the news of Lazarus' illness, then he would have arrived in Bethany after Lazarus had been dead 2 days, instead of 4.

But John is very clear: Lazarus had been dead for 4 days by the time Jesus arrived. And that means Martha and Mary have been waiting for two days. Two long, sad, puzzling, time-dragging sorts of days. Two days of asking themselves, "Where's Jesus? Where's Jesus? Where's Jesus? He ought to be here by now? Where's Jesus?" And *finally* Jesus arrives, and the first words out of Martha's mouth are: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." *There's a whole world of assumptions and implications behind that statement...*

Nevertheless, having said this, Martha redeems herself, somewhat, with her very next remarks, when she says, “But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Now, at first, you might read those words and think that this is Martha’s way of saying that she believes it is not too late, that although she would have preferred that Jesus arrive sooner, her brother can still live again, and that Jesus can bring him back to life.

However, it seems to me that that possibility gets squashed when you get to verses 39 and 40. When Jesus actually gets to the point where he is about to do this amazing miracle, Martha is right there, pointing out to Jesus that perhaps he should re-think his command to remove the stone from across the entrance to Lazarus’ tomb. She reminds Jesus that Lazarus body will have been de-composing for 4 days and would, therefore, have developed a strong, distasteful odor by this stage.

Now those words, I submit to you, are not the words of a person who believes that Jesus has the power to bring a dead man back to life. True enough, Martha does believe that a resurrection is coming, on the *last* day. But it is pretty clear that she is not expecting one *to-day*.

And so, Martha’s stated belief that whatever Jesus’ asks from God, God will give him - that comment, while certainly an indicator of her continuing trust and confidence in Jesus, also seems to be coming from a person who believes Jesus can do a lot of things, but is not quite prepared to believe that he could do *anything* - most especially, bring a man dead for 4 days back to life!

And the fact that she IS thinking this way is seen in the brief dialogue that follows. In response to her statement of a *qualified* confidence in him, Jesus, seeing what is going on with her, goes straight to the heart of things with his statement that *her brother will rise again*. To which Martha responds by saying - in effect - of course he will rise again because, as she understands it, this is what happens for all of God’s people in the end. There will be a great resurrection on the *last* day.

So, Martha is thinking about the *future* and what will happen for her brother *then*, but what she is NOT believing at this moment is that the man standing right in front of her - Jesus - can bring that future reality into the present – that he can do something about it now. And so Jesus says to her, “*I AM the resurrection and the life*”. That amazing event and all the power and glory that go with it, that you are seeing as existing somewhere *out there, in the future - all of THAT every bit of it, is right here, right now*.

*I am the resurrection and the life.<sup>1</sup> Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*

Now, Martha’s response to this, in verse 27, is *possibly* a firm answer to Jesus’ question. It is possible that she is saying there that she does believe the very things he just told her. However, in light of what she is going to say in verse 39, it seems maybe more likely that her response here is a sort of half-answer. She does believe in him. She does believe he is the Christ, the Messiah of God.

She believes as much as she is able. But, as we've already seen, I don't think she is all the way there. Not yet. I think the whole notion of *anyone* being able to bring back someone from the dead is still something that she is not yet prepared to fully accept. It would be too much to believe. So she gives a kind of half-way response. Jesus is inviting her in, to believe in a way that she has not yet believed, to move into new and previously un-explored regions of faith - but she still pulls up short, I believe.

Well, after this, Martha suddenly takes off and finds her sister, Mary, and tells her, privately, that Jesus wants to see her. And so Mary, who did not seek Jesus out initially, is now described as rising *quickly* and going to him. There seems to be a change of heart indicated here, although it is not clear what is behind all of that...

At any rate, John tells us that, unlike what happened when Martha went to see Jesus, Mary has a sort of *entourage* that accompanies her, a group of mourners that were with her at the house in a way that they did not seem to be with Martha. And, while we cannot be for sure, it seems that this is likely an indicator of the different ways that Martha and Mary grieved, with Mary likely being more expressive and open, wearing her heart on her sleeve, being much more emotionally expressive and, as a result, more readily drawing the comfort and sympathy of those who came to offer their support.

So, Mary goes to Jesus and, falling at his feet, proceeds to offer the same opening line as her sister: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*". However, while she makes the same comment as her sister, it would appear from what is written that Mary's comments - unlike Martha's - came in the context of great sorrow and tears and broken-ness and weeping.

And the sight of this, combined with the weeping and mourning of those who had accompanied her, had a profound effect upon Jesus. The text says, "*...he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled...*" And our English translations do not really do justice to the original language here since, as most of the commentators agree, the words used to describe Jesus' emotion at this very moment are ones that are almost always used to convey not sadness, but anger, and even *rage*.

In other words, Jesus, at the sight of Mary's weeping, as well as the sorrow of all those who were with her - but at the sight of all this Jesus was not only sorrowful himself, but was also profoundly angered and indignant as he stood there amidst the wreckage that had been brought upon all humanity because of sin. He saw, like no one had ever seen before, the absolute mess that sin had made of God's creation and his creatures, and indeed, *continued* to make of these things. He saw these things, as His Father saw them, and he hated them as only a Holy God could hate such things.

And so Jesus, feeling both great sorrow and great anger, asked, "Where have you laid him?" And they said, "Lord, come and see." And at that point, as he began to make his way to the tomb, as the reality of all that he was thinking and feeling weighed in upon him, he broke down and *wept* with *real* tears, borne of both sorrow and rage, with emotions that were perfectly appropriate, and which made perfect sense, even existing side by side as they did.

And those around him, the Jews, noted both his great *love* for his friends and, at the same time, echoed the questions and disappointments already expressed two times before in these verses, asking the pointed question, "...*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?*"

Well, as I've said before, there is just so much here. So much more than we could ever hope to address unless we wanted to take three months to work through it - which we're not going to do - to your great relief I'm sure. So, admitting that, let's set our sights a little lower and see if we can just pull out a *couple* of things to think a little bit more about. For instance, there is this whole thing with Martha and Mary and their response to Jesus, once he finally arrives.

While Martha and Mary are two fairly different people - in terms of their personality - what they had in common, it seems, was this just barely disguised disappointment with Jesus. It just seems to me that the response they *got* from him, in their moment of great need, was not the response that they were counting on, or anticipating, and it left them a little confused.

And these women loved Jesus, and I think they knew that he loved them. Indeed, that is probably one of the main reasons why Jesus' response to them was not an easy one to understand or accept. But it was precisely because Jesus *did* love them, as well as their brother, with a divine love, a *holy* love, with a love that was completely in step with the eternal purposes of the Father - it was because he loved with *that* sort of love that he was constrained, *by that love*, to act in ways that did not always make "sense" from a human perspective, even if they made perfect sense from an eternal one.

And it seems to me that it is just as easy for you and I to be a lot like Martha and Mary - to send for Jesus in our moment of crisis, and with that request have all sorts of unspoken expectations about how, in our view at least, a loving God would respond to the circumstance in question. And then, when he doesn't respond when or how we think he should have, we can become confused, and disappointed and even a little dis-illusioned at times. And we are tempted in ourselves to, like Martha and Mary, remind God of what might have happened if only He had shown up....

And, while we can all admit, I think, to being in these very same places ourselves, and probably more than once, we would do well to keep in mind the larger story that is taking place all around the verses we have focused on this morning. When we do that, we see Jesus who never made one single mis-step, was never late, was never in the wrong place at the wrong time, but who always did just the right thing, at just the right time. We see Jesus who, for the greater glory of God, and for the more substantial and profound encouragement that would come to his people, determined to respond to them in ways that they would not immediately understand or appreciate but which, from the perspective of eternity, will reveal themselves for the flawless, loving, wise, and good purposes that they truly are.

The other thing that I want us to go away thinking a bit more about are the deep, real, substantial emotions expressed by Jesus in this story - and how good and right it is that he expresses them. Firstly, I want you to think about Jesus' *sorrow*. I don't think this is just window dressing here. This is real emotion that Jesus felt for a real friend that he had lost.

I am amazed at the comments of some scholars who have looked at this and have passed it off as ridiculous that Jesus could be weeping over Lazarus' death. These scholars say that it doesn't make any sense that he would get all emotional about it - knowing full well that he would be raising him from the dead in a matter of days.

My own response is to say just the opposite. I think that it would be ridiculous to think that the one who was more fully human than we will ever be, and yet who, beyond that, was fully divine and understood as we will never understand, the truth of everything going on around him and who would have understood better than anyone present the real pain and agony and struggle that his friend was feeling, who understood the awful, terrible destructive power of sin and death and how it has ravaged God's creation from top to bottom - I find it preposterous to think that Jesus would *not* have felt what he felt.

Years ago, when I worked with the Rankin County EMS as both a medic and a driver. Our ambulance unit was stationed at Rankin General Hospital, just outside of Jackson, Mississippi. Which meant that, for our unit, there was no such thing as "down time". When we were not running emergency calls in the county, we were working alongside the ER Docs and nurses in what was a very busy Emergency Room. And we saw all kinds of things come through that ER.

One thing we saw a lot of was small children that came in with various cuts and lacerations that needed stitching up. And what we would sometimes have to do, particularly for smaller children who were absolutely terrified and had no intention whatsoever of cooperating with us - what we would sometimes have to do in those situations was put them on what we called a "papoose board" - which was a small wooden backboard, that had these large, velcro flaps that you could wrap around a small child's abdomen and, basically, wrap them up so they were essentially immobilized - which made putting in sutures on legs and arms a much more manageable enterprise for these children that, otherwise, were going to fight you the whole time. Now a lot of children didn't have to do this. But there were a number that did.

And every time we had to use this thing, it was always difficult for the parents. Even though they understood that it was necessary, and even though they knew that things would be alright in the end and that their child would be fine. That didn't matter. Because when they saw their child in such distress, and looking at them with this "please make it stop" expression on their face - well the parents would often become quite distressed themselves. Because even though *they* understood - they knew their child *didn't*. And because this was their own flesh and blood, hurting and frightened and there was just no way they could witness that and not be affected.

Now, that's just a simplistic, limited and crude example. But the point is, if mere human beings, knowing as little as we do, and loving as poorly as we do - if we can react that way in situations where our loved ones are hurting - how much more should we expect that He who knew all things, and loved like no one ever loved before would feel real and great emotion when his loved ones are hurting and even dying - even *if* he *did* know that it was going to be alright in the end.

So, was this real emotion on Jesus part? You bet it was. And thank God it was. And what a comfort to know that *this* is the God to whom we belong. This is the God who knows our hurts and anguish, who takes no pleasure in our pain and suffering, who has a knowledge that is not diminished by his love and a love that is not truncated by his knowledge and purposes for us. Our God is not some great, impersonal, force, not some stone-faced, cosmic chess player, moving the pieces around on the board, detached and un-affected by what is happening with and to his creatures. Jesus wept - and he wept knowing full well the amazing things that were about to happen. And these were not tears for show or good form. He hurt. He ached. He sobbed for his friend, Lazarus.

But there is more going on here with Jesus, than just sorrow. There is also, as we have seen, this very real anger and indignation that Jesus felt as he considered what a mess sin had made of his people and his world. His was a holy anger, a righteous indignation welling up within the one who was righteousness himself, the one who was holiness itself, the one who came to repair and restore what was broken and lost and damaged, the one who was about to engage in spiritual warfare the likes of which has never been seen as he takes on sin and death.

And the testimony of these strong emotions of sorrow and anger, expressed by Jesus, especially in the face of the reality of death, have implications for us today. As one commentator writes,

*“In some Christian circles Jesus’ power over the grave is embraced with such conviction that there is no permission to mourn the tragedy of death. To grieve is to show a lack of faith; funerals are to be celebrations of eternal life and victory. To a degree this is true, but it denies a basic human need to express the sorrow and dismay that comes with loss. One obvious thing about John’s story is a thing we may pass over quickly: Mary and Martha were crying. Jesus did not say to Martha, ‘If you believe in the resurrection, why are you wasting your time and your tears?’ He did not say to Mary, ‘If you have victorious faith, you should stand clear-eyed and confident because I am here.’ No. Jesus did not impede this family’s grieving; instead by joining with them, he give generous permission. It is right to describe death as terrible and painful and horrible without compromising the quality of our faith. Jesus himself cried in anger at the wreckage death brought to one family....”*

And so it is that, for the Christian who has his/her eyes open - being confronted with death is a multi-emotional experience. On the one hand, there is the possibility of real grief and mourning and sadness and sense of loss. On the other hand, there is also the real possibility of genuine thankfulness and even victory in the knowledge of what Jesus has accomplished and what that means for this one that we love who has died. Further still, there is the possibility of real indignation and even anger over the way that - for a little while longer - sin and death continue to wreak their havoc upon God’s creation and creatures. All these emotions are fully legitimate expressions for the people of God in the face of death - sadness, joy, anger. Until Jesus comes back, they are all legitimate. And they all have a proper place in the emotional life of the believer. But they also all keep us leaning forward, looking forward to the day when the sorrow, and the anger, will be gone forever. And only the joy will remain.