

I am the Resurrection and the Life

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you so much to the band for leading us with some wonderful songs. And thank you to all those who have participated already today. Margot, it was great to hear your story, what a challenge that is, as you have spoken to us about what God has been doing in your life. And thank you, Drew, for reading this wonderful passage, John chapter 11. And as we now spend a few minutes thinking about it, I'm convinced that God may have very different things to say to different ones of us here today. And Margot, you were very helpful in speaking about the fact that sometimes maybe it's just a line of a song or something that causes you to leave, feeling that there's been something there for you in a particular service. I've been absolutely fascinated looking at John 11, seeing the way in which Jesus reacted quite differently to Martha than he did to Mary. Here are two women going through exactly the same situation. For both of them, they've experienced the loss of their brother four days before. And so you might think that Jesus' approach to Martha and Mary is going to be identical. But it's not.

Martha comes running to Jesus when she hears that he is approaching. She comes and she says the very same words that Mary said later on. She says, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died.

Feel free to check it out in John chapter 11. It's there in verse 21. And Jesus, in response to what Martha has said, gives to her words. And aren't we glad that he gave to her those words? Because they're the words at the center of our gathering today. The words which stand and instruct us and encourage us and have done for Christians and followers of Jesus on down through the ages. I am the resurrection and the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live even though they die. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Mary comes along later. Mary comes along and says, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died. And Jesus responds with not a single word. Not a word. Instead, he stands with her and weeps. He stands and weeps and twice we read that he is deeply moved in his spirit. And it's in the interaction with Mary that we get these wonderful words, the shortest words. In the shortest verse in the Bible, as many of us will know, Jesus wept.

I don't know why it is the case that both came to Jesus with the same needs, saying the same things, and one received the words at the center of our passage, and another received no words, but simply received what an incredible assurance that Jesus felt her pain. And my prayer is that as we reflect on all that we've already heard and spend another few minutes together, that whatever situation you find yourself in today, you'll have an encounter with Jesus. The one who knows us, who knows you, and who knows exactly what you need to hear this morning. So let's pause and invite Jesus to speak to us directly today. Just a moment of silence as we, before we go further.

Lord, you know what each of our hearts and souls and lives need today. Thank you for what you've already spoken to us, for how you've already spoken to us through this service. Continue to speak, not through my words, but through your Holy Spirit, God. Amen.

[4 : 42] So a passage today that is full of contrasts, death and life, belief and disbelief, power and weakness, tears and joy. A passage that I think will have real relevance to us as we seek to tune in to what the risen Lord Jesus has to say to us. Maybe it's speaking to us through the struggles and weaknesses that we have and that we present to God today. It's a passage in which Jesus is unquestionably the central character, in which he is clearly in absolute control, in which he takes very deliberate action at a specific time so that others will see his power and his glory. But yet it's also one in which we see Jesus showing such depths of tenderness, of empathy, of compassion and friendship, strength and determination and control. Compassion, tenderness and friendship. What do we need from Jesus this morning as we are here? Do we need a fresh understanding of him as the risen Lord and

Savior who commands us to turn and to follow him? Or do we need to know him as the one who weeps with us in our sorrows and struggles? Let's focus in then on the words that Jesus used when he speaks to Martha in verse 21. Martha's pain is so evident. Let's take a moment to try and enter into her circumstances.

She has nursed her sick brother. She has hoped and prayed for his recovery. She felt Jesus was her only hope and she got a message out to him but he never came. She's surrounded by family and friends but none can provide the answers to her questions. She loves Jesus. She's had him in her home and she knows that he loves her and her sister Mary and Lazarus. She feels that she can speak to him with absolute honesty.

So she says, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died but I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask. And Jesus says, your brother will rise again. And she says, yes Jesus, I know that he will rise in the resurrection at the last day. And Jesus says, Martha, I am the resurrection and the life.

The one who believes in me will live even though they die. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. And notice he doesn't end there. He then asks a question. Martha, do you believe this? Jesus, who knew absolutely everything, took the time to ask Martha a question.

[8 : 17] It's at least one of four questions that Jesus takes the time to ask in this passage. Feel free to have a look afterwards. I've spent this week or three days of this week being trained in how to resolve conflicts and how to try to negotiate and mediate. Don't bring me too many situations, please, just in case I'm not yet too well up on how to do it successfully. But one of the key points that I was made to focus on throughout this week was the way in which we can ask questions that really enable others to speak freely and fully. Questions that get beneath the surface of what is presenting.

Questions that ideally are big, open questions that allow others to expose a little bit of what is going on. Who, what, where, why, when questions. I think our human interactions and our interactions with each other as a church would be greatly enhanced if we took the time to ask big questions of each other, getting below the surface and really listening intently to what we hear in reply. And of course, the flip side is true that when others ask us those big questions in a church, we need to be willing to give some honest answers that perhaps expose some of our own vulnerabilities. And I'm encouraged by the fact that Jesus wasn't willing just to make a statement and then move on. Certainly not a statement of this importance, but would make that statement about being the resurrection and the life. And then would pause and say to Martha, Martha, Martha, where are you at with this? Martha, is this, is this tuning in to where you're at? Is this truth that really is landing with you? Or Martha, are you hearing something totally different? Martha, do you believe? Do you really believe that the one in front of you is the one who can say, I am life in the midst of this death? Do you really believe that I can bring your brother to life now and in the last day? Martha, do you really believe this? As we look at our present life, as some of us look at perhaps sickness and pain and death, I wonder if we can hear Jesus' words in John 11, 25, which for some of us, I know will be words we've heard many, many times, and simply hear Jesus saying, do you believe this? Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life? The only hope for life after death and the only hope for life now. This is the whole purpose of the book that we have in front of us, this book of John's gospel. In John chapter 20, verse 31, the writer says this, all of this is written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. In this profound statement in John 11, Jesus makes it absolutely clear that he is the way to everlasting life, life beyond death, and that he is the way to life now, life before death. And then the rest of the time we've got together, I'd like to look at these two ideas, life beyond death and life before death. Let's look first at life beyond death.

That seemed to be the thing that Martha found easier to grasp. Oh yes, yes, Lord, I know that my brother's going to be alive in the resurrection at the last day. She had absolute confidence somehow or other in life beyond death. But maybe some of us will find that harder to believe this morning.

I think it's important that we recognize the context that just as the death of Lazarus cast its shadow over this whole story, so Jesus' own death is drawing very, very close when we get into John chapter 11.

And Jesus is absolutely clear that his own death and resurrection is going to be necessary in order to offer eternal life and resurrection to those who will believe in him.

[14 : 03] And I'm really keen that we don't miss Jesus' sense of absolute determination here, his absolute sense of mission and purpose, that he was heading to the cross, that he was heading there to die, that he knew he would rise again, and that he knew that was the only way in which we would have life after death. John chapter 3 verse 14. There's three that I've picked out as I've read through John in preparation for today. John chapter 3, we hear this, just as Moses, these are the words of Jesus, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

John chapter 10, what we looked at last week, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. My sheep, listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. And finally, John 12, the chapter after this one, verse 23, Jesus says, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Now my soul is troubled and what shall I say?

Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name. I labour this because I've been struck this summer by the fact that the church risks missing this.

We might risk missing this. Elizabeth and I were at a church over the summer where the speaker decided to speak about heaven. And as part of his message, he said, as far as I could gather in a Christian church, that our hope of getting to heaven was through doing good works here on earth.

I trust that we can see through looking at this passage and through the verses that I have brought to us today, that that is not the message of Jesus. That Jesus comes telling us so clearly that his death and resurrection and belief in that death and resurrection is the only way in which we can have absolute confidence in life after death, in the reality of resurrection for us.

[16 : 59] Jesus. And I don't want us to miss a word that comes again and again and again through John's gospel and that comes even three times in Jesus' short encounter with Martha in verse 25. Did you notice the word that's repeated three times? Anybody there with it?

I'm the resurrection and 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. Do you believe this? Three times, Jesus challenges Martha about the necessity of belief. In verse 45, we read that many of those who had come to visit Mary in light of this wonderful miracle that Jesus had done, believed. But we also read that many in light of all that Jesus had done that day in Bethany, disbelieved and actually took what had happened and went away all the more determined to tell the Pharisees and kill him. As I reflected on this, I remembered the words, well, I was reminded that they were words of Charles Spurgeon who said, the same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay. Jesus comes and enacts before them the most remarkable miracle to show his power over death, to provide such substantial validation if needed of those claims to be the one who can give life. And some turned believing and others went away more resolved than ever to see him executed. And so again, I ask, what is our response to Jesus Christ today as he comes with these words? Now, I want to really emphasize that believing is not about having no doubts. I'd like just to spend a minute or two on this because I think we see this so clearly in the passage. In verse 16, I love Thomas. There's Thomas.

Thomas. As Jesus says, I'm going to go down to Jerusalem. I'm going to see Lazarus. Thomas believes. He loves Jesus. He wants to follow Jesus. He trusts Jesus.

But he's also full of doubt. And he says words to the effect of, well, why not? Why not? We'll go with Jesus and we'll just all die together. He reminds me of that much-loved character, Eeyore. Some of you may wish to go and see or watch the film, which is effectively a follow-up of Winnie the Pooh, Christopher Robin. As I was thinking of Eeyore, I like this one particular little extract from A.A.

Milne. It's snowing still, said Eeyore, gloomily. So it is. And it's freezing, is it? Yes, said Eeyore.

[20 : 17] However, brightening up a little, we haven't had an earthquake lately. Thomas is willing to go with Jesus, but thinks it will be a disaster. Martha is uncertain.

Mary has no confidence at all, it seems, anymore that Jesus can help her brother. But look what she does. She falls at his feet. She pours out her pain. She expresses her confusion.

Why, Jesus, didn't you come? Why didn't you stop the bad stuff from happening? Why, why, why? Jesus isn't angry at her response. He's deeply moved in spirit and troubled. And so I come this morning with a real conviction that while Jesus is challenging us to believe and to trust in him for life now and for life eternal, he recognizes that for some of us that might be hard.

For some of us, we may feel we've got just as much doubt and uncertainty as we do confidence and conviction.

And maybe what we need to recognize this morning is that that's okay. We come not being asked to believe in a concept, a theory, or a religion, but being asked to trust in one who knows us, who loves us, who recognizes our weakness and sin, but who died for us to forgive us and call us to him.

[22 : 01] And as I've reflected on what does it mean for us to really believe in Jesus this morning, the phrase in my mind, it's about us choosing to lean towards Jesus rather than turn away from him.

Maybe some of you today, you're tempted to turn away. Maybe if you reflect on how you've lived this week or in recent weeks, you would have to recognize that perhaps ever so subtly, what you've been choosing to do is to turn away from Jesus.

Yeah, you're conscious of his words, of his challenge, of his offer of life. But for whatever reason, you, we have been leaning away.

And today, perhaps a bit like Mary, we're encouraged to move towards him, to cling on to him and to say, yes, I believe.

Help me, Jesus, with all of my doubts and disbelief. But finally, and very briefly, as well as Jesus inviting Martha to receive him and to recognize him as the one who gave life and could give life beyond death.

[23 : 28] Crucially also, he wanted Martha and Mary and all the rest to see that he was the one who could give life before death. He was clear that Lazarus was not going to be lying there dead until the final resurrection.

Lazarus would be summoned from the grave and would rise again to life that very day. And it's as though Jesus is actually saying, Even now, I can cut through death and decay to make everything new and hopeful and full of life again.

Even now, I can answer your prayers and give you fresh life and meaning. Even when you think it might be far too late.

It's the fourth day and Lazarus is decaying and there's a stench. Even when you think it's too late. I can reach in and bring life now.

I wonder how Lazarus lived following his resurrection. Strange thing is, we don't know a single word that Lazarus said following his resurrection. But I'm pretty sure he didn't live with one foot in the grave.

[24 : 46] I'm pretty sure he lived with a great sense of newness of life. One thing we do know is that he spent time with Jesus. Very next chapter, Jesus is there having a meal with Mary, with Martha.

And we read that Lazarus is there reclining with Jesus. We also knew that life wasn't easy for Lazarus. Because we read later in that chapter that because some were so angry about Lazarus's rising from the dead, they were trying to kill him.

But even as we look at Jesus in this passage, I think we can look at one who modeled what it is to live a full life now.

Jesus knew that others wanted to kill him. He knew he was surrounded by foes and enemies. And yet what we see is Jesus living with an absolute clarity of purpose.

He's heading to the cross to die. He's clear about why he is doing so. And on the way to that cross, he will take every opportunity to demonstrate to others what it means to know him and to follow him.

[26 : 05] He's clear about his purpose. He's absolutely clear about his priorities. He'll wait a couple of days. And then he will head to Bethany for this very deliberate meeting.

He's clear that he will absolutely take time for prayer. And he's clear about the fact that he will absolutely take time for people.

His purpose, his priorities, his prayer, his focus on people. There's no doubt another sermon there that might be for another day. But what I want to leave you with is just that picture of Jesus as the one who I think provides an example of what it means to really live.

Of what it means to live, yes, with confidence in life after death, but with absolute confidence in life before death. Maybe some of us need to take time ourselves in quiet study to ask that Jesus would show us what he's really looking for us this side of eternity.

How he really wants us to live with fullness of life before death. I've been reading again and enjoying this book by Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Where in summary, in over 40 days of short, very simple readings, he unpacks for us that our purpose is that we were planned for God's pleasure made to worship him.

[27 : 29] We're formed for God's family, made to play a full role in the life of the church. We're created to become like Christ, being more and more like Jesus week by week.

And we're shaped for serving God and serving others. A missionary returned to America on a ship, the same ship that the President of the United States of America was on.

And as the missionary headed into harbour, she saw bands, red carpets, waving crowds gathered to greet the return.

The return not of her, but the return of the President. She feels discouraged. She feels unnoticed.

She wonders, has it all been for nothing? Why was there no one there to greet me in that way? And as she reflects on this and pours out her heart to God, she senses these words from God himself.

[28 : 37] My child, you aren't home yet. She still had life to live for God before death and a sure hope of life after death.

May that be our experience too. Let's pray. And so we invite you once again, Lord Jesus, to speak to us in our situation today.

To reveal to us what it means for you to be the resurrection at the life. And by your Spirit, would you help us to believe.

Amen.