



Week 12: Lazarus – Death to Life

John 11:1-53

GOAL: To understand what Jesus means when he says HE IS the resurrection and the life – in the here and now as well as for eternity – so that our faith and trust in him overshadows our grief and doubt.

CHECKLIST

- ☐ Invest in your own spiritual life by participating in the daily Growth Guide readings. (This will also prepare you to lead the question about it in your group again this week.)
- ☐ Reach out individually to anyone who did not attend last week. Let them know that you missed them and would love to see them this week.
- ☐ Prepare for your group meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- ☐ If you haven't already, plan your Grow Group Pair-Up by connecting with the leaders of your paired group.
- ☐ Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members (please include their names and contact info in the meeting notes section). Help new members register for your group using the QR code in your room or at vrbc.net/grow.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Father, I confess that there have been times when I was disappointed with you, disappointed with your timing, disappointed with what I perceived as inaction. I know you welcome my honesty, and you understand my grief. Deepen my faith and trust in you to such a degree that I can more often say, "It is well with my soul" no matter what, because I trust that you are enough, and you are always acting for my ultimate good. Amen.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

CONNECT & COORDINATE

We will maintain the same rhythm each week this semester:

1. Welcome your group. Repeat introductions if there are any new people.
2. Coordinate any logistics (group socials, snacks, Grow Group Pair-Up, etc).
3. Check in with your group and gather prayer requests. Consider using the following questions:
 - Where did you see God at work this week?
 - Where do you need God in the week ahead?
4. Pray for the requests shared and for God to lead your time together today.

DISCUSS

Read John 11:1-16 – The Death of Lazarus

- What do we know about Martha, Mary and Lazarus and their relationship to Jesus? Why does Jesus delay in going to his dear friends who were in crisis?

Leader's Note: *Luke 10 gives us our first introduction to Mary and Martha who become dear friends of Jesus. They offer him hospitality and there's good reason to believe he stopped at their home quite a bit when he was near Jerusalem. Perhaps they were people of means because of the hospitality and the fact that Mary pours a bottle of very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. Their brother, Lazarus, either lived with them or in the same town of Bethany.*

Let's do a little geography next: Bethany was a town east of Jerusalem about 2 miles. When the sisters send messengers to Jesus, John 10:40 seems to indicate that Jesus had left Jerusalem and gone out to a place called "Bethany beyond Jordan"(Perea), which was known as the place where John the Baptist had been "baptizing in the early days." This area is thought to be east of Bethany about 20 miles (a full day's walk), just across the Jordan and directly north of the Salt Sea (Dead Sea). If this geography is correct, Lazarus must have died shortly after the messengers left to go find Jesus. They traveled a day, Jesus delayed two more days, then Jesus walked to Bethany which would have taken a day. When Jesus got there, remember, Lazarus had already been buried 4 days. Therefore, Lazarus would have already been dead even if Jesus had come immediately.

This brings us to a short explanation on Jewish culture around death. It is traditional for the body to be buried immediately in a tomb. Mourning was then practiced for seven days from the day of burial. It was a communal affair and many had come to comfort Mary and Martha. This explains why there was still a crowd in Bethany when Jesus arrives. One commentator explains that there was a traditional belief that the soul stayed near the body for 3 days just in case it could enter back in. So people checked the body after 3 days to make sure it was dead. As of the third day, the body was dead beyond a shadow of a doubt. No chance of a resuscitation. It would have been obvious to 1st century readers that John was intentionally giving specific details so as to imply that Jesus intentionally waited until the 4th day to arrive. There could be no assumptions that Lazarus wasn't really dead, no

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labeling Jesus' miracle as a mere resuscitation. This was truly a resurrection – from death to life!

It was no small matter for Jesus to decide to go back to the vicinity of Jerusalem. His life was already in danger because he had spoken so plainly about who he was as the Messiah and the religious leaders wanted him controlled, out of sight, or dead. This explains why the disciples were not too keen to hear he was going to Bethany and why Thomas resignedly says, "Let's all go and die with him." Jesus knew the cost of going to his dear friends in Bethany. He would save Lazarus' life, but he would be days away from giving up his own. This wonderful gift for his friends would set sinister plans in motion. When Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go to him (Lazarus)," he was setting his face toward the cross and his own tomb.

- Have you ever experienced God not responding in the timing you thought was needed? How does Jesus' response to Lazarus' illness deepen your understanding of divine timing and purpose and how might you apply this to your own life's circumstances?

Leader's Note: *These questions draw out the implications of this story for our own lives. Please use at least one. You may not have time for all, but don't miss the opportunity for your group to reflect on their own story with Jesus in light of Lazarus' story.*

Almost everyone has probably been disappointed by God's timing related to some need in their lives. Help them think through the implications that God can have purposes beyond our understanding. Some may even have a testimony about how they learned God's timing was best. But even when we don't see it yet, ultimately God's resurrection power will fully redeem all that is lost or broken.

Read John 11:17-37 – Jesus Comforts the Sisters of Lazarus

- Compare Jesus' interactions with Martha versus Mary. How does Martha's interaction with Jesus reflect her faith and understanding of his identity? What can we learn from Jesus' compassionate interaction with Mary? Why do you think Jesus wept when he knew what he was about to do for Lazarus? What does this say about his nature and his character?

Leader's Note: *Pastor Amy does a masterful job of pointing out how Jesus brings his presence and care to each of the sisters. Both sisters say almost exactly the same thing: if only Jesus had been there, Lazarus would not have died. They didn't hold back on expressing their disappointment. They poured out their heart to him. They couldn't understand how he could let this happen. Lazarus was his dear friend!*

Martha seems to be less demonstrably emotional while no doubt still feeling her loss deeply. Jesus is able to use this opportunity to teach Martha of the deep realities of who he is as God and Savior. He meets her where she is in her faith and takes her deeper. He makes his powerful revelation, "I AM the resurrection and the life." She confidently engages with such statements as "I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask," and "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who has come into the world." Such faith! And she says this BEFORE Jesus brings life back to her brother.

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As a side note, I (Deirdre) just have to say that I love how Jesus interacts with women. Martha calls Jesus “teacher (rabbi).” This is significant because women were not taught by rabbis in the first century. Jesus dignifies these women as full participants among his followers. If he is their rabbi, they are his disciples.

Mary is weeping when Jesus sees her coming to him. The Greek word here does not imply silent tears with the occasional snuffle. This word means sobbing, wailing, ugly crying. And what does Jesus do? He joins her. He cries too. Why? When he knows what is about to happen, why does he cry? The Greek words translated in verse 33 as “deeply moved in spirit and troubled” imply a feeling of anger. Eugene Peterson translates it “. . . a deep anger welled up within him.” Jesus knew this was not the way it was supposed to be! All of the misery and suffering brought on by a broken and sinful world, this was not what God created us for and he was on a mission to set things right.

One commentator says, “Jesus did not impede this family’s grieving; instead by joining with them, he gives 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. Death is a foe that in Christ is being defeated.”

- When has Jesus met you in your times of grief? How does Jesus’ statement, “I am the resurrection and the life,” impact your understanding of his role and mission as Messiah? Do you agree with Pastor Amy’s statement, “Grief and faith can live in the same heart. Jesus welcomes both?” Why?

Leader’s Note: *I can remember sitting at the bedside of my mother when she was gravely ill, wasting away from cancer. “There’s nothing more we can do,” the doctor had said. As I prayed for her, I remember thinking, “This is not the way it’s supposed to be.” I remember telling God that I didn’t want her to go, but I also didn’t want her to suffer anymore. I had full confidence (and so did my mother) that she would immediately be in Jesus’ presence once her breathing stopped. Grief and faith were simultaneously present in my mind and heart.*

All of us have our “If only” moments. Everyone probably has events in their lives where they look back and say, “If only . . .” Everyone, if they are honest, has been disappointed with God. Mary and Martha teach us to be honest and real about our disappointment. But they also teach us that we can still have faith in God. We may not understand, but we can still trust him until he shows us the “why” or until we don’t need to know anymore.

Give your group an opportunity to speak to these questions themselves. Let them give testimony to how Jesus has met them in their grief.

Read John 11:38-44 – Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

- What does Jesus’ prayer tell us? How does Lazarus’ resurrection underscore Jesus’ power and authority? Why do you think this was Jesus’ final “sign” and what is it foreshadowing?

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Leader's Note: Jesus' prayer indicates that he had talked to his Father already about Lazarus and was fully prepared for what was going to happen. Some scholars suggest this is what he had been doing for the two days he delayed. He thanked his Father for the miracle that was going to take place. He says he is also praying aloud for the benefit of his bystanders, desiring that each of them would let this "sign" point them to true faith in himself as Messiah and Lord.

Jesus commanded that the stone enclosing the tomb cave to be rolled away. He wasn't worried about the stench. He knew Lazarus' body was not decayed. I wonder if he was also thinking about the stone soon to be rolled across his own tomb. He would command that one to move too.

The text says Jesus shouted at Lazarus with a loud voice, a confident and commanding voice, "Come out!" And he does! As Pastor Amy suggests, I'm thinking this was something of a wonderful and frightening sight! Do you think Jesus was the first to get to him? Maybe even embraced him? I imagine Jesus was the first one at his side. Imagine Jesus' delight. Imagine the sisters' joy. Imagine Lazarus' confusion and exhilaration!

Then Jesus gives another command: "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." It was a practical suggestion! Why leave those things on him? He was alive! He was free! I wonder if Jesus was envisioning the day when his own victory over death would enable the removal not only of his own grave clothes, but also of the grave clothes of all his redeemed. No more need to manage the "stink" of death. Everything made NEW through the power of Christ.

This Jesus had the power to command death to flee. He had authority over the one thing that no other human being could control. Only God has power over life and death. The text says that many of the Jews "put their faith in him" when they saw what he had done. But some . . . turned him in to the Pharisees. Jesus knew this would be the case. Through this final sign, Jesus gave proof to his words. He was indeed THE resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in him will live, even though they die.

Jesus was also foreshadowing events in his own life within the next week. He would die on a cross, labeled a criminal and imposter. He would be buried in a borrowed tomb. But death would not hold him for long. His resurrection would mean LIFE for all who believe. I'm reminded of the hymn, "And as he stands in victory, sin's curse has lost its grip on me. For I am his and he is mine, bought with the precious blood of Christ."

- How does the resurrection of Lazarus give you hope in times of personal loss or grief? Do you feel it is "too late" for Jesus to do something about a particular situation in your life? How can you make room for Jesus to help you? What "grave clothes" do you need to leave behind to walk in the freedom of Christ?

Leader's Note: Again, please give some time for your group to engage with Pastor Amy's message through these questions. Encourage them toward personal application for how Jesus can be "the resurrection and the life" right now in their lives.

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PRAY

Leader's Note: Guide your group through these prayer points, inviting folks to pray silently or aloud as is fitting to your group.

- Pray for those in your group who right now are experiencing loss or grief.
- Give praise and thanks to God for being the source of LIFE in the midst of so much that is broken. Thank him for the hope we have because Christ has overcome death.
- Ask Jesus to bring his resurrection power to your life, surrendering all that feels lost or broken to him.
- The purpose of this sermon series on “Signs” is so that “you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31) If you have never taken the step of asking Jesus to be your Messiah, the Savior and Lord of your life, don’t wait. Begin life with him now by simply asking him to save you, to forgive you, and to teach you how to live for him. Then speak to one of our pastors or your Grow Group leader about next steps.
- Pray for Holy Week and Easter services at VRBC that many will be drawn to the resurrection life of our Lord Jesus Christ.