

Dead or Alive?
John 11:1-44

Rev. Tracey Davenport
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There is not one person here who cannot grab onto this story and wish it were true. There is not one person here who has not been affected by death – the death of a parent or grandparent, the death of a child, the death of a dear friend. Either as welcome relief from suffering or an untimely accident, death is a universal. There is nothing humans can do to avoid it or conquer it. We are all going to die. We have tried with our technology to prolong life, and even to create life. We have also blurred the line between life and death. Is life a heart beating? On its own or with assistance? Is life brainwave activity? Are we sure we can tell what constitutes life and death? Even if we can, there is no technology to beat death. We continue to try however, because there is something inside of us that fights it. We are programmed to want to live.

In this story from John, Jesus reveals three things about death. **First of all, death is not the end of our existence.** Jesus describes Lazarus' death as "falling asleep". The disciples misunderstand what Jesus is saying. Then he must tell them in their own language. Lazarus is dead. But, this is not the first time the disciples have heard death described as falling asleep. Mark and Luke record the miracle of Jairus' 12-year old daughter being raised from the dead. Remember when Jesus arrives at the house, the mourners are weeping and wailing. Jesus says, "Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping." The mourners laugh at Jesus, until he takes her by the hand and calls out, "Child, get up!" Her spirit returned and she got up at once. There was an early Christian hymn that Paul quotes in his letter to the Ephesians that sings, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead." We even get our word cemetery from a Greek word, which means, "sleeping place." In Jesus and the early church's understanding, death was not annihilation, but just a change, much like falling asleep and then being awakened.

Secondly, we learn from this story that Jesus hates death. Note how Jesus reacts to death and its affects on those left behind. When Jesus sees Martha weeping, verse 33 describes Jesus as greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. The Greek verbs used there are even stronger than our translation indicates. The verb translated greatly disturbed in spirit here really means to be angry or indignant. The verb translated deeply moved really means agitated or troubled, and was often used to describe a horse that was snorting and kicking. One thing is clear. Jesus is not happy with this situation. He is angry and agitated at the affects death had on this family

whom he loved deeply. Jesus also weeps on the way to Lazarus' grave. He is not just shedding some tears. Jesus is weeping, sobbing, at the death of his friend. If there is one thing we can take from Jesus' reactions here it is that Jesus is against death. The fact that we humans die is not the way Jesus wants it. This is not the way it was supposed to be.

The third insight the story of the raising of Lazarus teaches us about death, sickness, or any difficult situation is that the best course of action is to appeal to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Notice the wording of the note that Mary and Martha sent to Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." The note did not say, "Remember Lazarus, how good Lazarus was and what great faith Lazarus had?" It did not lay out why he deserved to be healed for the good of the community. It simply said, "He whom you love is ill." The point is that Jesus loved Lazarus. This is much like telling a parent that their child is hurt. All you have to say is, "Your child is hurt." The parent does not need to hear all the details or evaluate the child's obedience or loyalty before they run to help. The plea for help appeals to the parent's love for that child, not that child's worthiness to receive it.

In 1989, an 8.2 earthquake almost flattened Armenia, killing over 30,000 people in less than four minutes. In the twinkling of an eye, worlds were shaken and lives crushed. In the midst of the chaos and destruction a father rushed to his son's school. But instead of a school, he found a shapeless heap of rubble. Other parents were walking around the school, crying, dazed, clutching at their hearts and calling out their child's name. But in the case of this father, the sight of the rubble and ruin only made him spring into action. He ran to the back corner of the building where his son's class used to be and began to dig. Why? What real hope did he have? What were the chances that his son had survived such destruction? All he knew was that he made a promise that he would always come for his son after school. It was that promise that motivated his hands and his heart. As he began to dig, well-meaning parents tried to pull him out of the rubble saying, "It's too late!" "They're dead!" "You can't help!" "Go home – there's nothing you can do. Then the fire chief tried to pull him off the rubble saying, "Fires and explosions are happening everywhere. You're in danger. Go home!" Finally the police came and said, "You're angry, distraught, but it's over. Go home and let us handle this."

But this father continued to dig for eight, 12, 24, 36 hours. Then in the 38th hour, he pulled back a boulder and heard his son's voice. Immediately he screamed, "Armand!" Back came the words, "Dad? I told them. I told the other kids that if you were still alive, you'd come for me. You promised you'd always come for me, and you did it Dad!" A loving,

determined father, a promised kept, and a stone rolled away to reveal not death but life, just like the story of Lazarus. When we are in a tight situation, when we or someone we love is ill, the best course of action is to lay it out before the Lord and appeal to His love.

The story of the raising of Lazarus not only tells us something about death, but also something about life. First of all, **Life is person.** Life is not the condition of a beating heart and breathing lungs. All throughout this gospel, Jesus has claimed to be necessary for life. He promised the woman at the well living water. He said, “I am the bread of life.” Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Life is a person and real life can be had only by joining the one who is Life. Life with and in and through Jesus Christ is abundant, eternal life.

Secondly, **the life that is ours in Jesus Christ does not end with our physical death.** Jesus said, “Those who believe in me, though they die, will live.” Yes, we still die physically, just as Lazarus eventually died again, physically. But, physical death for the one joined to Christ is just a passage, a promotion to finally see what has been true all along: though we die, we will live. When Dwight L. Moody was close to dying he said, “Someday soon you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody is dead. Don’t you believe it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.” To die is gain.

Third, this story shows us that eternal life starts now. Jesus said that everyone who lives and believes in Him will never die. Jesus is saying that just as life does not end with our physical death, it does not start there either. From the moment we take Christ and the Life that He is, we are alive. We are alive in Christ now. We use terms for believers like born again, regenerated, and new creation to describe this. The promise of the resurrection is not some distant event at the end of time as Martha supposed. It is a reality for us the moment we are united with Christ. This life with Christ that we live now is real, abundant and eternal.

The promise of life is an invitation. “Do you believe this Martha?” Jesus asks? Do we believe this? It is rather hard to believe that Lazarus was raised after being dead for four days. It is actually an outrageous story to many in the 21st century. But I can tell you that what was the city of Bethany in Judea, where Lazarus lived, became and is to this day the city of Al-Azarizeh, which is the Hebrew name Eleazar, in Greek Lazarus. Or I can tell you that there were about a hundred witnesses to this miracle. Or I could even argue that the Pharisees did not dispute this miracle. In fact, they believed so surely that from that day forward they plotted to kill both Jesus and Lazarus for being sorcerers. But, a better question than do you believe that Lazarus was raised is: Do you believe that God, acting in Jesus Christ,

has power over the course of live and death? Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? If Jesus is, then this Lazarus incident was a piece of cake. Our God can make dry bones live. Our God makes dead things alive. And if Jesus is who he claimed to be, the resurrection and the life, then anything in your life that is dead and in the grave can be made alive in Jesus Christ, no matter how rotten it has become. Whether it is your job, your marriage, your church, your own self-worth, or even your own physical body, Christ makes it and you alive again. Do you believe this?

I believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be. I believe it for the same reason that we worship on Sunday and not Saturday. I believe it for the same reason that in two weeks we celebrate. I believe because Jesus himself went into death and came out alive, not to die again as Lazarus did, but to live forever. Do you believe this? If you do then amen and hallelujah three times. Remember that you are made alive in Christ to live an abundant, eternal life. If you are struggling with believing, I encourage you to immerse yourself in the story of Christ's passion and death during Holy Week. Experience in worship the events that took place. And get ready for Easter Sunday, our story of a determined father, a promise kept, and a stone rolled away to reveal life and give freedom.

Do you believe that God in Jesus Christ has the power of Life over death? I do. So someday when you read or hear that Tracey Davenport is dead, don't you believe it.