

DaySpring Baptist Church  
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## Dying into Life

John 11: 25-37

When we gather with the people we love most around the life issues that matter the most, there are going to be misunderstandings and disagreements. There is no greater life issue than the issue of death. In our focus passage for this morning, Jesus and a family he loves are gathering because of the death of one of the family members. The worlds of life and death collide.

Let's pray:

Father, we love you. We bow in reverence before you on this new morning. You have created us and you embrace us. We are your children. In your Holy Word we are instructed to come boldly before the throne of grace and we are instructed to worship in spirit and in truth. The truth is we have some questions about life. Our experiences even this week teach us that life is both wonderful and cruel; life is durable and fragile; life is restored and lost. In response to our prayers for miracles, we often only receive comfort. God, that's about as bold and honest as we can get this morning. Receive our love and prayer and be merciful we pray, in Jesus' name, amen.

The curtain opens on a fascinating scene. Jesus finally arrives in Bethany. I say "finally" because he had been summoned by Mary and Martha nearly a week earlier to come to Bethany to heal their brother Lazarus who was quite ill. Jesus got the word, but took his time getting there. Jesus processed the request from an orientation toward life, those who've called on him have called from an orientation toward death. By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Why bother calling on Jesus if he's not going to show up when we need him?

When Martha heard that Jesus was nearby, she ran down the road to meet him. She met him with the same mixture of reverence and boldness that was present in my prayer just a minute ago. Jesus, I love you, I bow in reverence before you, but to be perfectly honest and a bit bold, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. She tries to buy back some of what she blurted out by saying, “But even now, I believe you can fix things.”

Don’t back off Martha, go ahead, tell him, we’re right behind you. Tell him about my brother, too, yeah, and my daughter, and tell him about my husband, too; tell him Martha, you go girl.

Jesus absorbed the scolding and assured her that her brother would rise again. “Yes, I know,” she said, “he’ll rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” but, *my Lord*, I mean, *my Lord*, we sent for you *last week* and now Lazarus has been dead for four days.

Martha was speaking out of the depths of her heart and out of the traditional Jewish belief that the soul sort of hung around the body for three days, hoping for a reuniting. But when the body began to give off the odor of decay, the soul left. She was downloading all of her frustrations and disappointments, boldly, honestly.

Jesus heard her, and was moved, nearly to tears, when he replied, “Martha, **I** am the resurrection *and* the life. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die and that includes Lazarus. Do you believe me?” “Yes Lord,” she replied. But her silent heart’s cry is one that I’m sure Jesus could hear then. We can almost hear it now, “Yes Lord, I know you’re the resurrection and the life. I’ve heard you say it and preach it and teach it, but the truth is that what used to be my brother is now a body and it stinks.” She

left Jesus standing there as she ran back home in a combination of frustration and hope. We know the feeling.

After a quick trip back home, Martha returned to where she had stopped Jesus in his tracks, but this time she has her sister Mary with her. Many of their friends who had been sitting with them back at the house followed along. They were Jews, many of them from Jerusalem.

Mary walked up to Jesus and wouldn't you know it? Her greeting had the same subtle sting in it that her sister's had had. "Jesus, thank you for coming, but if you had come when we called, our brother wouldn't have died."

The sisters are crying, the friends who came along with them are crying, and the NRSV says that this caused Jesus to be "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved."

"Where have you laid him?" asked Jesus. Over here Lord, come and see. On the way over, he began to weep. Jesus joins us in our weeping and in so doing blesses weeping as a holy state of heart and soul. Jesus weeps with those who weep; us and all others who weep. It is evidence that Jesus has fully entered the human world of death in order to call us to life.

The people gathered saw that Jesus was weeping and they began to whisper, "Oh, look, see how much he loved Lazarus." Jesus loved Lazarus, that's true. But I'm not convinced that's the only reason Jesus was weeping. There must surely have been a mixture of love, pity, sadness and frustration in his tears.

Jesus, fully God and fully man, can see that even his closest friends and followers continue to live in two worlds, life and death...believing and not believing...and the two worlds are colliding within their hearts. Yes, Master, we *believe* in the world of life and

light that you teach and preach about, but, we *live* in this dark world of death on every hand. Jesus knows both worlds and keeps calling us from the world of death into the world of life. We are called into a unity and focus of heart and mind, made complex and difficult by the tug of war between flesh and spirit. We cross over by dying to the old nature and rising to new life in Christ. We tell that story every time we walk down to the cow trough to baptize a new Christ-follower.

“Okay, now, remove the stone from the mouth of the tomb.” Jesus’ words brought a frightened hush over the small crowd. This we know, Jesus was going to call Lazarus out of the grave, one way or another, one day or another. But Jesus didn’t come to pull us *back* from the grave. He came to pull us *through* the grave. Call Lazarus back from the grave and he’s going to have the same body, and he’s still going to have to deal with death. Let him go and he will be released with a new body into life. Maybe its one of the reasons Jesus begins to weep in this passage. The worlds of life and death are colliding and Jesus grieves for those in both worlds, especially now, especially here, staring at the tomb. He weeps with us and for us. He grieves with us and for us. Oh, see how he loves us.

We must love someone before we can grieve for them *or with* them. We can declare some seemingly disconnected death to be a tragedy, but we do not grieve. We do not grieve without love. Neither do we weep. During Lent we are purposefully reminded of how little we weep. A Tsunami on the other side of the world, a single mom struggling in poverty in our own town, someone desperately lonely in our own midst; we do not weep. Jesus weeps for those in such instances of life and death, of life and living death,

confusion. He joins us in our weeping and invites us into his world, so that we might love as he loves, love whom he loves, so that we might weep with him.

To ask to be spared grief is to ask for love to be lessened. To ignore the grief around us is to seek to reduce the amount of love Jesus would channel through us. Jesus will not be a part of lessening love. Nor will he be a part of dulling life, even at its sharpest edges. Jesus wept over the misunderstanding of his followers. Jesus wept for what Mary and Martha had gone through and for what Lazarus and his sisters would now have to go through again. And Jesus weeps even today for all who live in two worlds, battling between life and death, between light and darkness, between knowing and not knowing, between the old sinful nature and the new life in Christ. Lent is an invitation for us to weep with Jesus *for* all people and *with* all people, and for ourselves.

“Lazarus, come out!” and with those words both worlds, the world of darkness and death and the world of light and life, both worlds reverse their living and dying. Lazarus was in, now he’s out, but he’ll have to go back in, but then some day he’ll be back out...the world of death and the world of life trip over each other at the threshold of the tomb as Lazarus comes stumbling out. Martha and Mary and Jesus weep for present joy. But Jesus weeps also with sadness for the death they will face again. The tears of death and the tears of life, like the worlds they represent, collide. Jesus came that we might have life and that more abundantly and so that we would only have to die once. But he, alone, understood it. Mary didn’t understand. Martha didn’t understand. Lazarus wasn’t sure what was going on. Jesus was feeling very much alone, very much suspended between two worlds. These worlds collide within us every time we pray for one who is dying, every time we grieve for one who has died, every time we must discuss the

continuation of life support apparatus, every time a loved one is pulled deep into the abyss of Alzheimer's. We pray our hearts desires as well we should. We pray our confusion and pain as well we should. Our physical world and our spiritual world - the worlds of death and life collide. This world's death and the next world's life collide. There is a confused traffic jam at the mouth *of every tomb*. Jesus stood there and wept. Jesus stands there and weeps. He weeps for us and offers to usher us through the dying into life journey and transition.

As John tells it, the raising of Lazarus was the main event that set things in motion toward Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Some of the Jews present believed in Jesus after this miracle, but others were frightened by it and went running back to Jerusalem to tattle to the Pharisees. So whether pulling the dead through the grave into heaven, or pulling the dead from the grave back into this world...both are connected to the death of Jesus on the cross.

We should not feel badly about our life and death ambiguity, our confusion about desiring heaven, but fearing death. The season of Lent reminds us that as Jesus faced death he prayed in the garden for another way. Lent reminds us that Jesus' cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" was not unlike Mary and Martha's cry on the road, "My Lord where have you been?" The season of Lent reminds us that whether our two-world confusion is our daily dying to self or our dealing with the death of a loved one or dealing with the prospects of our own death, Jesus knows his way in and out of tomb and he can shepherd us through the confusion that death brings to life. The season of Lent reminds us that the life-giver died into death so that we might **die into life**.  
Amen.

