The Gospel of John: *The Resurrection and The Life*  
John 11:17-37

Last Sunday Pastor Greg and Pastor Todd began our journey through John 11. If you recall, Jesus was summoned from His rural headquarters to the home of Mary and Martha in the city of Bethany, just two miles outside of Jerusalem, because their young brother, Lazarus, had fallen gravely ill. Jesus, who had a very loving and intimate relationship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, delays His response for several days, and consequently, Lazarus dies. Then, after Lazarus dies, Jesus leads His disciples to Bethany, much to the chagrin of Thomas who is pretty certain that their return to Jerusalem will mean certain death for Jesus and the disciples at the hands of the Jewish leadership.

Let’s pick up the story now as we read John 11:17-37:

17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” 23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24 Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” 25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” 27 She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” 28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. 34 And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37 But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) Our Universal Complaint; 2) Resurrection vs. Resuscitation; 3) The Tender Heart of Our Lord.

**I. Our Universal Complaint**

Mary and Martha were women of great faith. They had an intimate, loving, almost familial relationship with Jesus; and they honored Jesus as their Lord. They had absolute confidence in Jesus. So, when brother Lazarus became ill, they immediately sent a messenger to track down Jesus and alert Him of their situation. The sisters believed…they had faith…that when Jesus heard “the one He loved” was sick, He would immediately come to their aid and Lazarus would be healed. But that isn’t what happened, is it?

The first 16 verses of this story in John 11 create tension in two ways.

First, Jesus literally states in vs. 4, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Then, just a few verses later, we learn that Lazarus dies. In fact, our text this morning states that Lazarus was dead and in the tomb for four days before Jesus makes it to Bethany; and even Jesus Himself tells His disciples in vs. 14,
“Lazarus has died.” So…there is some tension here, right? Jesus said that Lazarus’ illness would not lead to death, but now Lazarus is dead. Either Jesus was wrong about His prediction, or Jesus is talking about something we do not yet understand. Hold that thought, we’ll come back to this tension in a minute.

The second tension comes in what John writes in vss. 5-6, “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” Uhm…what? Let’s get this straight: it was because Jesus so loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus that He delayed responding to their desperate plea; and, consequently, Lazarus dies. You do feel that tension, right? Now, hold on to the tension here in the text because it is there for a reason. Why? Because we feel this tension every day in our lives, right?

We know God is powerful and capable of saving us and our loved ones from sickness and death, but so many times our desperate prayers seem to go unanswered. We do everything we can to muster up our faith, we beg God to intervene, but then so often our hopes are dashed to the ground and we are left with the inevitable question: where was God? How could He let this happen?

Listen to the complaint made by Martha in vs. 21 and by Mary in vs. 32: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Church…does that complaint sound familiar? If you are paying attention, Mary and Martha just articulated our universal complaint against God: “Lord, if you had been here—” Lord, if you had been here, my child would not have died. Lord, if you had been here, my marriage would not have failed. Lord, if you had just shown up, my house would not have been foreclosed on. Lord, if you had been here…none of this painful mess would have occurred.

Over the last 30 years I have heard this complaint more times than I can count. Sometimes the complaint is so strong that it leads people to lose their faith. Even amongst the most faithful people in any church, you will hear this complaint over and over again: where was God when…? Where was God when my wife got cancer? Where was God when my son started using drugs? Where was God when my husband started having an affair? Where was God when my child died? Church, if we live long enough, we will all experience a season of suffering and loss so severe that we will be inclined to lobby the complaint made by Martha and Mary: “Lord, if you had been here…” It is our universal complaint.

Now notice, Jesus doesn’t scold Martha and Mary for their complaint. Expressing emotions to the Lord is not a sin; in fact, the Psalms make it very clear that we are invited to lament, question, and cry out to God when we are hurting. Remember the lament of David in Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me
2 How long must I take counsel in my soul
   and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
3 Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;

God can handle our emotions; He longs to hear from us; and God will minister to our pain as we present ourselves honestly before Him.
Now, even though it is totally appropriate to lament and cry out to Jesus when things do not go as we had hoped, we must take a moment and consider the assumptions that underlie our complaint. When we complain to God, we are typically working under these kinds of assumptions: 1) A loving God will protect me and the people I love from harm; 2) A loving God will come to me when I call; 3) A loving God will surely care as much or more than I do about long life and safety. 4) If God does not come when I call; if God does not heal me or my loved ones; then I’m not sure that God is loving, or that God is even there at all.

Most people knowingly or unknowingly hold on to some version of these assumptions. Mary and Martha have similar assumptions. Listen again to what they said to Jesus: “Lord, if you had been here, Lazarus would not be dead. Did you hear their assumption? “If Jesus is present, He will always rescue those He loves from dying.” Is that a fair and accurate assumption?

Martha presents another assumption in vs. 22, “But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Martha has great faith in Jesus…but do you hear the assumption attached to her faith? “Jesus, if you really wanted to, you could still bring Lazarus back to us, because the Father always gives you whatever you ask of Him.” Did you see what she did there? Lots of us pray like this, by the way! “Jesus, I know you can heal my child…the question is do you want to? Because if you wanted to, all you have to do is dial up Dad and it’s done!”

Now…is that assumption even true? Does the Father always give the Son whatever He asks? No. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks the Father to “take this cup from me;” but then He says, “not my will, but your will be done…” and the Father does not spare Jesus the horrifying journey to the cross.

Church, be careful what assumptions you attach to your faith. Remember the words of Isaiah 55:8-9:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.

9 “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Our Lord’s perspective, purposes, and providence are indeed deeper, higher, and greater than our assumptions. That said, we are emotional beings who cannot help but lament when people we love are no longer with us, or other such times of sorrow. So…let us learn from the text. Bring your honest lament to Jesus, but do so with humility and honor, recognizing that some of our assumptions about how Jesus should respond to our requests may be unreasonable and/or unbiblical.

That leads me to my second subheading…

**II. Resurrection vs. Resuscitation**

When Martha makes her complaint to Jesus that His absence was the reason her brother was dead, Jesus replies: “Your brother will rise again.” Jesus comes bearing the power of resurrection…a power so great that it conquers death. Resurrection is the reason Jesus has been
sent into this dying world. From the perspective of our Lord, resurrection is the answer to the question Martha is asking. But Martha is not satisfied. We can almost hear a hint of irritation when she replies, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Yes, yes, yes…someday…many years from now…eventually…Lazarus will rise. That’s all well and good; but I want resuscitation now! I want my brother back. I don’t want to live the rest of my life without him. All that talk of resurrection is a nice religious concept…and I hope it’s true…but can you not ask the Father and bring Lazarus back right now?

Church, how many times would we honestly prefer resuscitation over resurrection? In other words, we just want to keep people alive longer. We want to keep our marriages alive longer. We want to keep our business running longer. We want to extend life at any cost…we want resuscitation…when in fact, according to Jesus, what we should truly hope for is resurrection. Listen to how Jesus responds to Martha in vss. 25-26: 25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”

Jesus is not pointing Martha to some distant eschatological event at the end of the age. The end of death is Jesus…period. Jesus is the Zoe…the eternal kind of life…and those who have Jesus can not and will not “die.” Those in Christ have been and will be resurrected from death to life; and the life they have in Jesus will never die.

This is why, by the way, Jesus can say of his beloved Lazarus, “This sickness will not lead to death.” Though the body of Lazarus lies in decay in the cave, his soul is very much alive because of Jesus…so according to Jesus, Lazarus is not actually dead. Death has no claim over him.

Church, the work of Jesus is to bring resurrection and life into this dark world. Resurrection follows death…and resurrection defeats death. That is to say, we don’t want a resuscitated life—we want a resurrected life, amen? We want the Zoe that Jesus died for us to inherit…that is what matters more than the length of our days on earth, because the Zoe—the eternal life of God—never dies! The Zoe—the eternal life of God—is that which the Holy Spirit applies to transform us into “little Christs.” The Zoe—the eternal life of God—heals our broken hearts, restores our broken marriages, and renews our hope in the darkest hours. Church…we don’t want resuscitation…we want the Resurrection and the Life, amen?

You don’t want to resuscitate a mostly-dead marriage. You want a resurrected marriage infused with the eternal life of Jesus that makes all things new! You don’t want to simply extend your soul-sucking job, you want your vocation to be resurrected in the Zoe life of Christ! Jesus is in the business of resurrection…not resuscitation. But in order for us to experience resurrection, we must first surrender our hopes, dreams, assumptions, and expectations to the Lord. It is a kind of daily dying

C.S. Lewis said it brilliantly in Mere Christianity:

“Christ says, ”Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good...Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked--the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.”
Church, if your assumption about Jesus is that He is interested in resuscitation...that He agrees with your obsession regarding safety, health, and long life for the natural man...get used to disappointment. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us to bring us Resurrection and Life...the eternal kind of Life which makes all things new in our lives now, and defeats death when we breathe our last. Jesus came to give us Himself—a far better gift than resuscitation, amen?

Now, having made Himself clear regarding His identity as the Resurrection and the Life, Jesus asks Martha the most important question that we all must answer at some point: “Do you believe this?”

Church, whether you believe something or not does not make that something true or false. Regardless of how Martha answers, Jesus has already proclaimed an immutable truth: Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. That is not a subjective claim that is true for some and not for others. Jesus is not one “resurrection” among many. Jesus has just revealed what is forever, always, and constantly true. However, when we are grieving, the impact and power of Truth will depend upon whether we believe that Truth or not, right?

If Martha holds on to her stubborn assumption that Jesus could have and should have come four days ago and saved Lazarus from dying, her grief remains and is even made worse through a growing resentment towards Christ. However, if Martha believes what Jesus just said...if she believes to her very core that He is the Resurrection and the Life...she will know beyond doubt that Lazarus is not dead; that he will rise; and that Jesus is the Sufficient Shepherd, even in the valley of the shadow death. So, what does Martha believe?

Martha replies, “Yes Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” What an amazing confession of faith! Martha’s confession is precisely the conviction we all need in our darkest hour. Our conviction should not rest in what Jesus could have done for us; but in what Jesus has already done for us! Our conviction should not rest in our assumptions of what “a loving God would do,” but in who Jesus IS—He is the Christ, the Son of God, Our Good Shepherd, the Resurrection, and the Life! Truth matters...that is one of our core values, and truth matters a lot when we walk in the valley of the shadow of death.

OK, let me conclude briefly with my third and final subheading...

**III. The Tender Heart of Our Lord**

As we return to the text, Jesus instructs Martha to send Mary to Him. We read beginning in vs. 28: 28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.
I love this part of the story for a few reasons. First, notice that Jesus is patient to meet us as individuals and to deal with us in the most appropriate and tailored approach. When the first-born, matter-of-fact Martha makes her complaint to Jesus, He engages her with the Truth, and that is exactly the medicine that Martha needed in her moment of grief and confusion. However, when Mary makes the same complaint, Jesus does not speak at all. He understands that Mary is emotionally devastated—weeping uncontrollably—and now is not the time to teach. Now is the time to show compassion, care, and empathy. Jesus takes on her sorrow and joins her there. Note the tender heart of our Lord. John records that Jesus “was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.” We already know that Jesus is not “greatly troubled” about Lazarus…Lazarus will rise again. Lazarus has Zoe because He is in an intimate relationship with the Son of God. So why is Jesus deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled? Because Jesus loves Mary with all His heart; and in love, He joins her in that broken, sorrowful place of loss. Friends, when we truly love others, we join them in their place of sorrow rather than trying to immediately lift them out of the place they are in. This is a critical part of loving others well.

Far too often we try to fix people instead of joining people where they are. When people are deeply grieving, the best medicine is typically the company of those who will remain silent and grieve with them. Remember the friends of Job who, when seeing his tremendous loss and suffering, sat with him on the ground for seven days, “and no one said a word for they saw that his suffering was very great.”

I also think Jesus is greatly troubled because Mary is in despair. She has lost her brother; she has lost her hope; she has lost her joy. I suspect Jesus feels righteous anger towards death…the evil invader introduced into the world because of sin. No doubt Jesus’ sense of resolve now grows even greater to see the Father’s plans through to the bitter end. Death shall not have the last word. Hope has come into the world to defeat death once and for all…and Jesus will remain troubled in His spirit to some extent until that moment when He steps out of His own tomb in the power and glory of resurrection.

As Mary weeps along with so many others, Jesus quietly asks, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”

We get the sense that Jesus begins to make His way to the place where Lazarus is buried, but on the way John simply observes “Jesus wept.”

For some of you, the fact that Jesus is weeping is somewhat concerning, right? Perhaps some of you have the notion that the Son of God, the Alpha and the Omega, should have no cause to weep when a mere mortal dies.

Ahh, but you have overlooked what we learn in Genesis 1:27. We were made in God’s image. God is personal. God is emotional. God created laughter, and God created weeping. Weeping is part of our Imago Dei…and we see that right here in John 11 when Jesus weeps. As does Jesus, so does God, right? Weeping and loving go hand in hand; and that is as it should be. We weep for those we lose to the grave because we miss them; and we long for them when they are not here. We weep in the face of physical death because we were made to live forever, and we all know deep in our souls that death is an intruder…it was never supposed to be this way. For
all these reasons and possibly many more, our Lord models true love, empathy and compassion as He weeps on the way to Lazarus’ tomb.

John records the response of the Jews when they saw Jesus weeping in vss. 36-37:
So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind also have kept this man from dying?”

The first group of onlookers could observe the deep, deep love of Jesus in His countenance: “See how he loved him!”

However, the doubters question the love that Jesus had for Lazarus in much the same way that we often question God’s love. In other words, if Jesus really loved Lazarus, wouldn’t He use His power to keep him from dying in the first place?

If you’ve ever known someone who lost a child, this question is always asked by someone in the family. If God truly loved our child…if God truly loved that young person, would He not have used His power to spare her life?

This is a hard question, and I will admit that we all struggle with these big “WHY” questions when we endure loss…me included. There are questions that will remain unanswered until we see Christ face to face, but in the end we must ask ourselves: Do we allow the circumstances of our lives to interpret Christ’s love? Or do we allow the love of Christ to determine the way we interpret our circumstances?

Theologian James Boice writes “Learn to interpret circumstances by the love of Christ and not Christ’s love by circumstances.”

Church, here’s how we know that God loves us, our children, and our spouses, and our friends, even in those times when He does not grant our heartfelt requests. We know of God’s powerful, unconditional love because God sent His only begotten Son to die on a cross when we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8) so that we might inherit His eternal life (John 3:16)! God turned His face away from His Son so that He would never have to turn His face away from our sons! Look to our Savior, and “See how much He loved” YOU…and all of us…as He endures torture and the cross so that we might be saved, resurrected and filled with Zoe…the eternal kind of life that makes all things new!

I know this message has pressed on some wounds for many people. Many of us are struggling with sorrow and grief, much like Mary and Martha. Our Lord does not always resuscitate those whom we are not ready to live without even when we beg Him to do so, though we must acknowledge that He never promised long lives of regular, never-ending resuscitation…right? The Bible helps us to understand that the evil intruder of death continues to wreak havoc in these dark days until the end of the age when our Lord shall return…on that day all the wrongs shall be made right and death will be destroyed once and for all.

Until that day, Church, take these things to heart. Our text here in John 11 shows us that our Lord is tenderhearted. He empathizes with our pain; He joins us in our place of sorrow; and He walks with us through death’s dark valley. And let us never forget the light in His eyes when He
revealed His identity to Martha on that sad day so long ago…it is a revelation that continues to push back the darkness of sorrow and death. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live; and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”

Church, do you believe this? If you believe this will you say Amen? Amen. Amen. And Amen. Death doesn’t win. Christ is risen; and in Christ, we shall rise again. Let us pray.