

“Death and Resurrection”
John 11:1-45

“So the sisters sent to him, saying, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’” I assume most of you have received similar messages... and I know some of you have received similar messages recently. It’s a sobering message, one that draws attention not only to the mortality of those you love but also to the mortality of you. When illness strikes you hope the doctor has answers and a plan and a high probability of a good outcome. And when someone you love falls ill you might go to him or her, hoping for one last reunion and conversation in case it really is the end of life—you go because life is not in your hands. But if life were in your hands, you would probably choose to save your loved one from illness and death, and extend life so that you might continue to enjoy the company of your loved one. But Jesus didn’t go. He didn’t go to see Lazarus, the one He loved. In fact, John writes that “when [Jesus] heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed *two days longer* in the place where he was.” If you waited two days to see a loved one on the verge of death you’d be accused of *not* loving. And if the loved one happened to die, the questions regarding your love for that person might become even more pointed. When you lose someone you love you might ask those questions of God, wondering (sometimes in sadness, sometimes in anger) why He simply didn’t come two days earlier. It’s almost natural to say along with Martha and Mary, “Lord, if you had been here, my [loved one] would not have died.” Yet illness doesn’t win the day over the love God has for humanity; and neither does death win the day over what God has prepared for His saints.

Because even though Jesus arrived what we might think to be two days *late*, He was making an occasion for faith. Jesus can heal and restore any life, but a life without faith is a life ultimately lost. And so “Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.’” You hear in these words the divine wisdom of God who works for ultimate good, because His concern is not only for Lazarus, but also for those who knew Lazarus. Jesus will care for Lazarus in His own way (a way different than we would probably choose given the same circumstances), and He’ll also care for those who loved Lazarus—not only physically, but spiritually. As the Lord declared to Isaiah, “my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:8-9). You must believe this is taking place all the time in the midst of tragedy, where *we* focus on an individual but where *God* focuses on everyone—where God takes hold of that tragedy and reshapes it as an occasion for faith! That’s one of the reasons John recorded this story for us: so that we might believe—despite appearances to the contrary—that God is working for our good and the good of many.

God is not apathetic to tragedy. You know this from the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept.” The Jews think Jesus wept because He loved Lazarus... but I think the net should be cast wider. I think Jesus wept over the deplorable condition of sinful humanity; He wept over the fact that His good creation has been corrupted and now realizes an awful finality in mortal death, not just for Lazarus but for all people. Isn’t this why you weep? You weep in the moment of the death of a loved one, but you also weep because you know that death will be experienced by you and all your loved ones. This sinful

condition of humanity that brings with it illness and death is tragic... but it doesn't win the day over God's love for His saints!

And so Jesus goes to Lazarus four whole days after he has died. And this is significant, because the rabbis of the time believed that only after three days decay began and the soul finally left the body. Jesus' arrival after four days left no doubt that Lazarus was truly dead. I'm reminded of the movie *The Princess Bride* when they take Wesley's dead body to Miracle Max and he determines, "It just so happens that your friend here is only *mostly* dead. There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive." But Lazarus wasn't mostly dead; he was absolutely dead, and so Martha warns that the odor of death may emanate. Yet Jesus reshapes Lazarus' death as an occasion for faith; and not only faith in Jesus as the Life but also faith in Jesus as the Resurrection, because Jesus has life in Himself (Jn 5:26) and He gives you this life unto resurrection: "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."

Jesus waited two days, and Lazarus died, but that doesn't mean He didn't love him. It means Jesus had more in view, which was the faith that gives those who loved Lazarus a certain hope in *eternal* life and the resurrection from the dead. Jesus' love for Lazarus or anyone who has died can't be questioned because He loved completely in His own death, and in His own resurrection He gave good news for all humanity! As Scripture tells us, Jesus risked His life journeying to see Lazarus, and ultimately Jesus gave His life so that you should "never die." The resurrection of Lazarus was for those who loved him, while Lazarus was given the unenviable circumstance to die a second mortal death. But in his resurrection we're given a glimpse of what God has in store for us and all His saints when Jesus finally says, "Unbind him, and let him go"; when Jesus removes the linen strips of sin and the cloth of decay and raises our bodies in glory, making perfect "this body of death" (Rom 7:24)! Illness doesn't win the day over God's love; and neither does death win the day over what God has prepared for His saints. We "look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." Amen.

—Pastor Greg Bauch