

## JOHN 11:17-27

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### **INTRODUCTION: Have you ever missed the main event?**

I went to a concert with my boys one summer. There was some sort of accident on the way that stopped traffic for about an hour. As a result, we ended up missing one of our favorite bands. We were literally walking up to the stadium as we heard the muffled sounds of their last and best song. Stuck in traffic. We missed the main event.

Or a friend of mine tells the story of going to a baseball game.<sup>1</sup> It's the seventh inning and nothing's happening. Neither team have scored all game. Nothing exciting has happened. So, he goes to get some baseball food. He snakes his way to the concession stand and gets a hotdog. And just as he's applying the mustard, there's a roar in the stadium. He heads back to his seat and his buddy who's been watching baseball for 35-years says, "Wow, I have never seen anything like that! What a home run! It left the stadium. It left the parking lot. It left earth's orbit. It was astounding! Where were you?" Getting mustard. He missed the main event.

Passage today takes us to main event of Christianity. Join me in praying we don't miss it. **[Pray]**

**CONTEXT (VV1-24):** Jesus has dear friend called Lazarus. Think of someone you really love. At start of chapter, we read that Jesus's friend has been sick. But now, situation has deteriorated and he is gravely ill. How might you feel if your loved one was on death's door? Jesus's friend, Lazarus, has two sisters – Mary and Martha – and they send for Jesus, saying **V3: Lord, he whom you love is ill.** It's a good model. If you're worried about a loved one, bring them to Jesus.

Jesus sends word back in **V4: 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.** Wouldn't this be an encouraging message to hear? Things don't look good but Jesus – the Great Physician – says this illness won't end in death. The tension in the sisters exhales in relief.

But then we're given a weird detail. Because Jesus loved this family (**V5**) he stays where he is for two more days (**V6**). Given the **urgency** of the situation and his **love** for the family, we'd expect him to go immediately. But he doesn't. He waits 48-hours and then he says to his disciples: *Now it's time to go.* Why is **now** the right time? Jesus tries to explain in **V11: Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.** Understandably, the disciples don't get it. They reply in **V12: Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.** A good nap is exactly what he needs! Why are we going to wake him up, in the middle of his recovery? So, Jesus tells them plainly in **V14: Lazarus has died,<sup>15</sup> and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.** Lazarus isn't asleep. He's dead. But apparently that's a good thing. How do we make sense of this scene?

Well, in **V17** Jesus finally gets to the family. By this time, Lazarus isn't just dead, we read he's **already been in the tomb four days.** This is an important detail. Jews at this time believed that your soul would hover over your body for three days after you died. Then, once decomposition set in, the soul would depart.<sup>2</sup> So the fact that Lazarus has already been in the tomb **four days** means he's not just dead – he's dead, dead. It's over. He's gone. There is no hope.

In **V20** Martha, one of Lazarus's sisters, hears Jesus is about to arrive and rushes out to meet him. But Mary, Lazarus's other sister, remains at home. When a loved one died in those days, it was customary to sit in your house for a 30-day period of mourning.<sup>3</sup> That's what Mary is up to here. But Martha – who is normally the rule follower – isn't having it. Overwhelmed by grief and sorrow she runs to Jesus. And when she finds him, she issues what one commentator calls a rebuke: **V21: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**<sup>4</sup>

We can understand it, can't we? We can imagine what it was like for these sisters? **How** their brother wasn't feeling well, so they put him to bed and made him some soup, hoped for a full recovery. **How** their concerns began to rise when the illness lingered and he didn't rebound like they'd hoped. **How** panic began to set in as he took a dramatic turn for the worse. **How** things became so desperate that they sent for Jesus. **How** their hearts found rest and peace when Jesus said the sickness wouldn't lead to death. **How** time began to pass... and Lazarus kept getting worse... and Jesus kept NOT showing up.

Have you been around death?<sup>5</sup> I think of my grandfather. I think of members of our church. You sit by the bed of your loved one. As the end nears, they slip in and out of consciousness. Moments of clarity, followed by moments of confusion. In time they speak their last words, rarely planned and eloquent, normally confused and incoherent. You continue to speak to them since hearing is normally the last sense to go. You whisper your love, your gratitude, then you weep for the separation that's happening even now. As the final hours arrive, breathing becomes labored, they gasp for breath as you hold yours. Then comes the death rattle – without the strength to swallow or cough – breathing becomes moist and shallow until it stops.

Death is a horror. It's not the way things are meant to be. And these sisters endured it all without electricity, without painkillers, without an ICU – and without Jesus who didn't arrive.

In **V23** Jesus responds to Martha's rebuke with a word of gentle comfort. Isn't he kind? **Proverbs 19:11** says: **Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.** That's what Jesus is doing here. Doesn't that encourage us to bring our own emotions to him? If you're angry or confused or you don't know what God is up to – take it to him and you'll find a compassionate ear.

Back to **V23** where Jesus responds to Martha's rebuke with a word of hope: **Your brother will rise again.** In **V24** Martha replies with a bit of theology that's true but doesn't seem to have much hold on her: **I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.** It's like she's repeating something she's been taught, but it feels like a religious platitude. So, Jesus interrupts in **V25: I am the resurrection and the life.** Resurrection and life. That's not just something that will happen on the last day. It's not just something that I'll do. It's something that I AM.

**CONTENT (VV25-44):** But what does that mean? Well, in the next couple of verses Jesus expands on his own statement – he preaches a mini-sermon on his own text. **V25: Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.** At first, this seems a little contradictory, right?<sup>6</sup> **V25: If you believe in me, though you die – you'll live. V26: If you believe in me – you'll never die.** So, which is it, Jesus? Do we die or do we never die?

Here's what Jesus is saying: Everyone will die physically. But if you believe in me, after physical death – you'll live. So, there's a sense in which you'll never die! Believe in me and I'll put a life inside of you that cannot be killed – even by physical death. One commentator describes this as the promise of continued personal existence.<sup>7</sup> The day the physical body dies is not the day the Christian dies. Believe in Jesus and you'll live forever.

As Martha turns this over in her mind, she goes to her sister, Mary, and tells her that Jesus is calling for her. Now Mary runs to Jesus and they have a similar conversation. Do you see it in **V32**? Mary has the same rebuke: **Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**

Jesus's response to this sister begins in **V33**: **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.** <sup>34</sup> **And he said, "Where have you laid him?"** They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup> **Jesus wept.** The shortest verse in our English Bibles. It points us to the love of Christ and it's the prelude to a miracle. We're getting to the main event.

**V38**: **Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.** <sup>39</sup> **Jesus said, "Take away the stone."** Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." <sup>40</sup> **Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"** <sup>41</sup> **So they took away the stone.** **And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.** <sup>42</sup> **I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."** <sup>43</sup> **When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."**

All Jesus does is raise his voice. It's as easy for him to raise the dead as it is to rouse a loved one from sleep. The voice that was at the beginning; the voice that created the world; now recreates with nothing but a word. And don't you love that he uses Lazarus' name? If he'd left it general, he's so powerful that perhaps lots of dead people would have risen up! But this is a personal resurrection – for Lazarus, the one he loves.

And just look at what happens. **V44**: **The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."** At the word of Jesus, Lazarus, **the man who had died** – the man who was dead, dead – comes alive, alive. Brain waves begin to fire again. His heart begins to beat again. His lungs begin to breathe again. Decomposed flesh recomposes to strength – and he walks out the tomb, out of death. The illness did NOT end in death because Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Martha and Mary had to wait. They didn't know what God was up to. They had moments of doubt. We all have moments like that. But see Jesus – he can always be trusted and he's always at work. Mary and Martha hoped for healing. But they got something better. They got resurrection and life.<sup>8</sup> They got the main event.

**CONSEQUENCE (V26)**: Before we think, "That's nice for them..." remember that it's also true for us. This Easter, we're not here to celebrate Lazarus, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He said of himself: **I have the authority to lay down [my life], and I have the authority to take it up again (Jn 10:18).** And today, we celebrate how he used this authority. Dying on the cross –

until he was dead, dead – he took the punishment our sins deserve. Then up from the grave, he rose again to glorious life – now he is alive, alive.

Jesus himself rose again from the dead – that’s the main event! And now the one who is the resurrection and the life has one question that can transform your death. Do you see it in **V26? I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?**

**[Unbeliever]:** Throughout all of humanity history, we’ve been fascinated with what happens after death. We see it in art, in music, in literature, in philosophy, in *The Avengers*. And in this passage, Jesus makes it clear. All of us will die physically. Don’t shy away from the reality that you will die. Have the courage to live in light of inarguable reality. The death rattle comes to us all.<sup>9</sup> But then what? Jesus says some will go to eternal life while others will face eternal death. What’s the difference between the two groups? The difference comes solely in how we answer his question. It’s the question that serves as the eternal divide. It’s the question that separates those who will die from those who will be saved alive, alive.

Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And he offers you eternal life today. If you believe in him – as the one who died so you don’t need to be punished for sin, and the one who rose to defeat death – he’ll call you by name. The promise of continued personal existence. Your death won’t mean the end of life. You’ll have a personal resurrection because he loves you.

Don’t miss the main event. Don’t be caught in traffic. Come listen to the best music you’ll ever hear. Don’t get caught messing around with the mustard. Come watch the greatest play you’ll ever see. Believe in Jesus and he’ll save you today.

**[Believer]: If you do believe, let’s rejoice!**

Did you know the shortest verse in the Bible is in fact NOT **Jn 11:35: Jesus wept?** That’s the shortest verse in English, but it’s not the shortest verse in the original languages. In Greek, the shortest verse in the Bible is **1 Thess 5:16**. Any guesses what that is? **Rejoice always.** Weeping is replaced by rejoicing.

We should remember that we added the verses – they weren’t given to us by God! But we are talking about a biblical truth: Because Jesus died, we have grace. Because he rose, we have life. Because he wept, we rejoice. The resurrection is the main event. And it’s ours in Christ.

In the end: **He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away (Rev 21:4).** Your burdens, your sorrows, your fears, your weaknesses will all be undone by him. *By His blood and in His Name; In His freedom I am free; For the love of Jesus Christ; Who has resurrected me.*<sup>10</sup>

As Christ called the name of Lazarus – so he will call out yours and mine. So, **Rejoice always.** He is **the resurrection and the life.** He is the main event. And we haven’t missed him.

## RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

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### Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John, Volumes 2 and 3*.
- John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*.
- Iain D. Campbell, *I AM... Exploring the 'I am' sayings of John's Gospel*
- D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*.
- Matt Chandler, [\*I AM\*](#).
- Ray Cortese, [\*To Believe\*](#).
- Paul Jeon, [\*Life Eternal: The Gospel of John\*](#).
- Logos Bible Software.
- R. C. Sproul, [\*Knowing Christ: The I AM Sayings of Jesus\*](#).

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See Ray Cortese, *To Believe*, accessed [here](#) on 5/14/20.

<sup>2</sup> See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 411.

<sup>3</sup> See Matt Chandler, *The Resurrection and the Life*, accessed [here](#) on 5/14/20.

<sup>4</sup> See R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Christ: The I AM Sayings of Jesus – part 5*, accessed [here](#) on 5/14/20.

<sup>5</sup> I owe the inclusion of this idea to the Chandler sermon referenced above.

<sup>6</sup> I owe the exegesis of this point to the Sproul lecture referenced above.

<sup>7</sup> See Sproul lecture referenced above.

<sup>8</sup> The insight that Martha and Mary got more than they expected is highlighted by numerous commentators.

<sup>9</sup> Strictly speaking, not everyone experiences the death rattle, but the point still stands – all of us will die.

<sup>10</sup> *King of Kings*. Words and Music by Jason Ingram, Brooke Ligertwood, and Scott Ligertwood.