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LAZARUS' LIFE IS JESUS' DEATH
John 11:1-53; Lent 5A; March 21-22, 2026

In two weeks, it will be Easter. Today we are given a preview of Easter as we see Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus rising to life points ahead to Jesus rising from the dead. We are also shown the flip side of Easter. What do I mean by that? Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and many people believed in Him. Because of this, the Pharisees and chief priests plotted to put Jesus to death, which they accomplished on Good Friday. Jesus raising Lazarus to life leads to Jesus' death on the cross.

As we consider this, we need to see ourselves as "Lazarus" in this Gospel account. We are the ones sick and dying and laid in the tomb dead whom Jesus will come and raise to life. Because Jesus will raise us from the dead, we believe in Him; we trust that He is our resurrection and life, that though we die, yet shall we live. We also realize that our resurrections to life came at the cost of Jesus' own death on the cross. Jesus had to die to raise us to life.

Some key verses in our lengthy Gospel account: **When Jesus heard [of Lazarus' illness] He said, "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"** (11:4); and, **Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe,"** (11:15); and, 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. Do you believe this?"** (11:25-26).

We must understand what Jesus means by "**glory**" in John's Gospel or none of what He says will or does makes sense. The death of Lazarus and Jesus raising him was for the **glory of God** the Father, **so that the Son of God [Jesus] would be glorified through it.** God's Son glorified His Father by dying on the cross for the sins of the world. Jesus' glory was to die as the spotless Lamb of God so that sinners like us, contaminated by sin and whose bodies have already the stench of death and the grave, will be raised by Jesus on the last day to follow our Lord and Savior from death to life eternal. We are "Lazarus" in this account, that is, ones like him who get sick and die.

When we are young, we can't imagine our deaths happening. The young think they are indestructible and live that way: not taking care of their bodies and doing risky things that often have long-term effects on them. I have heard people as they age say something like, "If I had known I would live this long, I would have taken better care of myself."

As we age, we can no longer delude ourselves into thinking we will live forever because our bodies remind us every day that death is coming for us. When we notice the signs, we can change our behavior and make healthier choices, which can improve our quality of life as we age, but we can't turn back the clock. Or we can look at ourselves as helpless and hopelessly live out the rest of our days in sickness and steady decline. Some sick and elderly people struggle to admit that they are dying and accept reality. Why?

Behind sickness, injury, disability, and death is sin, an enemy that we in ourselves are powerless to defeat. The sins of others may end our lives, but more often than not it is our own sin that kills us. What happens when we die? What comes next? The thought of that scares a lot of people, especially those honest enough to admit their sinfulness. "If I am going to die because I am a sinner, what will God do to me?" If we deny that there is a God who will judge us at death and think that death is simply the end of life, we will be in for an unpleasant surprise as we face the Judge. Either way we die; belief in God or unbelief, we will face our Maker and what will become of us?

Jesus said to His disciples that, "**Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.**" If Jesus had been at the sickbed of Lazarus, He would most certainly have healed him before he died, but Jesus chose not to be there and let Lazarus die. Actually, Jesus could have just spoken the word like He had done in other situations and cured a dying person from a great distance, but He did not do that either. When Jesus said He was "**glad**" He was not there, it does not mean that He was happy that Lazarus had to go through this; God hates sin and death; God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, much less the death of His dear friend Lazarus. Jesus was glad that this death and resurrection would lead to God's glory and His.

As Christians we need to get a grip on how God uses death for His purposes. God will cause deaths as signs of His judgment and condemnation for sin as a warning to the living to repent of the same sin and avoid the same sort of death that leads to the eternal death of hell. God will also allow our loved ones to die – sometimes in very tragic and sudden ways – not so we question His love for us, but to strengthen our faith that He will work through these losses, saving them and us by His Son Jesus. In the case of Lazarus, by Jesus raising him, His disciples and others would come to faith in Him as the One who raises the dead. We believe in Jesus because He can and will come to us after we have died and call us from the tomb like He did Lazarus, but to live forever. Jesus gives us something to trust in.

At the same time, that Jesus raises the dead does not always lead to faith but hardens unbelief. The Jewish leaders had made a life for themselves that was threatened by people believing in Jesus. They were afraid that the Romans would take away their high standing in society, power, and wealth. They were right about Jesus threatening their trust in power and wealth.

Jesus raising the dead is a sign to us that this world is passing away and the things of the world we hold so dear right now won't last forever. Whenever we chase after what the world says is most valuable, we are the Jews of the Council who plotted Jesus' death to hold onto what they did not want to give up. We need to repent of trusting in earthly things over heavenly things. If we think having high status in the community or accumulating stuff for our pleasure is most important, then Jesus is a threat to us.

Faith sees Jesus differently. For us to have life, Jesus had to die. Our sins caused His death just as much as the unbelief of the Jewish Council that had Jesus crucified. God works in mysterious ways. The solution to the "Jesus problem" that Caiaphas the High Priest suggested was actually a true prophecy of God's way of saving sinners. **"It is better for you that one Man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."** Jesus died because He raised Lazarus to life, and many people believed in Him as their Savior. The **"better"** or good that came from this is that Jesus' death forgives our sins, and His resurrection from the dead shows us that He will free us from death.

So, when we face our own deaths or the deaths of our Christian loved ones, how should we understand them? Jesus' words to His disciples about Lazarus "sleeping" are helpful, even though the disciples were confused at first. **"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." ... Now Jesus had spoken of [Lazarus'] death, but they thought that He meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe."**

From the Greek word for **"rest"** (κοίμησις-κοιμητήριον) we get our word for **cemetery**. When our bodies fall asleep in death, they rest in the grave until Jesus returns to awaken them. One of the ways we as Christians can confess our faith in Jesus as the One who raises the dead is to continue laying to rest in cemeteries the remains of our Christian loved ones.

Because of the high cost of burials these days, many people are cremated to save money, and their families do not bury their remains in a cemetery but put them someplace else. When Jesus returns in glory, He will raise us and all the dead wherever the remains are at the time. But by our continued practice of laying to rest our dead in cemeteries, we confess the truth that death is but sleep to God, and our Savior will return to awaken us to life.

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. Do you believe this?"** When He raised Lazarus back to life, Jesus knew it would lead to His death on the cross. It was His Father's glory to do this so that He, the Son of God, may be glorified – crucified – through it. In less than two weeks we will commemorate that glorious death in anticipation of Jesus' even more glorious resurrection. Jesus died to give us life. Jesus lives so that we might live forever with Him. Amen.