

To Live, To Die, To Rise Again – Virtual Version
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John 11:17-45

All life, plant, animal, insect or otherwise, must eventually die. I'm no zoologist but my perception is that human beings may be the only species that lives with the awareness of the inevitability of death. All species try to avoid death, scampering for cover when a predator approaches. But we humans carry the burden of knowing that we can put it off only so long. We can live healthy lives. We can get the best medical care available. We can take reasonable precautions against accidents. But we cannot put death off forever.

To our eyes, death seems pretty final. No movement. No breath. No sense of that spark that radiated during life. Our senses tell us that a deceased person has truly come to the end. Just on the basis of our own observations, we have to conclude that it is all over. Forever.

So, when we read that Jesus promises something beyond the horizon of death, a life that continues, we sure want to believe. But I think that even for the most faithful, there's a little nagging corner of doubt. We'd maybe like a little bit more proof of the reality of resurrection.

The idea of resurrection of the dead was pretty new in Jesus' day. It was a very controversial concept that did not have anything like universal support.

With that in mind, Martha, a peasant woman, shows some pretty sophisticated theological understanding when she says: "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." But I think we get a little glimpse of that nagging doubt when she scolds Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

My first experience with death came at age six, when my beloved Nana died quite

suddenly and unexpectedly. In the six decades since, I have had a lot more experience with the subject, both personally and professionally. I have lost three other grandparents, two parents and numerous other relatives and friends. In my role as pastor, I have seen countless others through the gut-wrenching process of grieving the death of a loved one or friend. I've seen something of death and its devastating impact on those left behind.

And if I've learned one thing from all of those experiences it is that there is a time to talk about theology, and then there's a time to shut up and just be present and supportive. People need some space to grieve, to assess the magnitude of their loss. They need space to be angry. They need space to scream and yell. They need space to sob themselves to sleep. They need space to be hugged and comforted. They need space to be alone.

And when it is time to talk about theology, abstract concepts of resurrection and salvation usually aren't very helpful. We need to be able to communicate those foundational theological principles in a way that they can be heard, understood and embraced.

John's account of the raising of Lazarus is a superb tool for demonstrating the concrete reality of salvation.

Lazarus has been dead four days when Jesus arrives. In Jewish lore, a person's spirit would linger for three days in the body before accepting the reality of death and departing. To be dead four days was to be truly beyond all hope of return.

In His dialogue with Martha, Jesus articulates the essence of the promise of resurrection for us all: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

That says it all right there. Believe in Jesus. That's pretty much it. As a person faces

death or as their family or friends struggle with grief afterwards, these two sentences represent as powerful and understandable statement of eternal life as you will find. And those words do not hang in the air with no context. They precede the most astonishing miracle in the Gospels: the restoration of life to a dead body. You cannot separate the words from the story, nor the story from the words.

We are now only two weeks away from the joy of Easter morning. But a lot still has to happen between now and then, and some of it is going to be pretty unpleasant. The resurrection of Lazarus gives us ultimate hope, hope that will sustain us through the betrayal, arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. Hope that will get us through many dark hours after Jesus has been taken down from the Cross. Hope that will spring into glorious reality on Easter morning. Keep that hope in your heart and you will know without reservation that the promise of eternal life is real.