

"I Am the Resurrection and the Life"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

April 12, 2009

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John 11:17-27 (NRSV)

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

John 20:11-18 (NRSV)

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Christ is risen. He is the resurrection and the life. Alleluia.

So we come to the final study in our series on Jesus' "I am . . ." statements. Though it is not the last of the seven such statements in John's gospel, it is certainly the most remarkable. In her commentary, Gail O'Day calls John 11:25-26, "the most far-reaching promise anywhere in the Gospel of what relationship with Jesus offers those who embrace it. They are a piece with the promises of living water (4:10, 14; 7:37-38), living bread (6:33, 35, 51), and even eternal life (3:15; 6:47; 10:28), but they supersede all those earlier promises by confronting head on the question of death."¹

The death of Lazarus

Jesus and his disciples have gone to the eastern side of the Jordan River, to an area known as Batanea² (John 10:40-42). It is about four days from the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, in Bethany, a town very near Jerusalem. There, Jesus learns that his friend Lazarus has fallen ill. A couple of days later, Jesus learns, by seemingly supernatural insight, that Lazarus has died. So Jesus, with his disciples, sets out for the four-day journey to Lazarus' home.³

¹From her commentary in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 694. A copy of the entire 12-volume commentary series is in the St. Andrew library thanks to a generous gift.

²Recent research suggests that the "Bethany" of John 1:28 and alluded to in 10:40-42 is not the "Bethany" located less than two miles from Jerusalem. Place names and especially their spellings were much more fluid in the ancient world than in our own. For more on this see D. A. Carson's commentary on John in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series.

³The four days is important. We know, from a rabbinical commentary called *Leviticus Rabbah*, that by a slightly later date, there was a rabbinic belief that after a person seemed dead to all observers, the soul hovered around for three days, waiting to depart until decomposition began. At that point, death was certain. If this was a belief held by any Jews in Jesus' day or even amongst John's readers, the four days makes it clear that Lazarus is dead,

When they arrive, Jesus is met by Martha, who expresses her regret that Jesus had not been there when her brother had died, for she believes that Jesus would have cured him and, even now, she places hope in Jesus and the unique relationship he has with the Father.

When Jesus says to her, “Your brother will rise again,” Martha naturally assumes that Jesus is speaking of the great resurrection of the dead that will happen when the Day of the Lord arrives. But now, Jesus takes her to a place she never would have suspected, saying to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (v. 25-26).

In this statement, Jesus is making two complementary points; i.e., he isn’t using “resurrection” and “life” as synonyms for emphasis. Gail O’Day helps us to see this “hinge point,” as she calls it. “Resurrection” and “life” refer to the two phrases that immediately follow in 25b and 26a:

Resurrected or Resuscitated?

Sometimes people mistakenly think of Jesus’ resurrection as merely some sort of resuscitation. But it was not. Jesus wasn’t brought back from death to life, but passed through death to life-after-death and then to the life after life-after-death.

But when Jesus brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), it was a “resuscitation.” Lazarus was brought back to life as he had known it and went on to die just like everyone else. In contrast, Jesus was not restored to the life and to the body he had known. Rather, Jesus passed through death to new life and a new physicality. Jesus no longer had a “soulish” body (*soma psychikon* in the original Greek), such as we all do now, but a “Spirit-filled body” (*soma pneumatikon*, see 1 Cor 15:44), just as we all will one day.

Here’s an analogy that might help. Lazarus’ raising was akin to someone who dies on the operating table but then is brought back to life. That person hasn’t defeated death, just merely been prevented from completing the process. Jesus, on the other hand, dies on the cross, goes from death to a life-after-death and, finally, to the “life after life-after-death” of resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection represented a victory over death that Lazarus’ resuscitation did not, though it is a foreshadowing of the real thing.

In their stories about the risen Christ, the Gospel writers don’t try to explain all this, they simply tell what happened. Jesus was recognizable, though his appearance was slightly altered. He ate, but seemed to be appeared inside a locked and unopened door. When we recite the Apostles Creed, proclaiming the “resurrection of the body,” we look forward to the day when we too, like Jesus, will receive a transformed and glorified, yet physical, body.

the one who believes in me and dies → yet lives
the one who lives and believes in me → never dies

Kept promises

Jesus is the resurrection, the embodiment of the promise that though we will die, we will yet live, that our death is not our end. This is the promise that one day we will be resurrected just as Jesus was resurrected. We affirm this promise every time we recite the Apostles’ Creed, asserting our belief in “the resurrection of the body.”

The promise of resurrection speaks to the life that will be ours, but when Jesus also says, “I am . . . the life,” he speaks to our life with God now. As hard as it may be to grasp and truly believe, God’s victory over sin and death is already ours. As Jesus puts it, the one who lives and believes in him never dies. In the glories of God’s great and wonderful mysteries, the defeat of death is not merely a promise, it is a present reality.

And so Jesus does bring Lazarus back to life, calling him out of his tomb. It is an act of compassion, another sign to the truth about Jesus, and a foreshadowing of what lies just days ahead for Jesus. Very soon, Jesus himself will be met by death as he hangs on a Roman cross.

Easter resurrection

Mary Magdalene has made her way to Jesus’ tomb early on Sunday morning. Very early. It is still dark. She is going to help finish preparing Jesus’ body for the year or so it will lie in the tomb,⁴ as there hadn’t been time to

dead, and dead! For more on this, see Carson’s commentary. Given the difficulties of ascertaining genuine death in the ancient world, this isn’t as crazy a way to think about it as it might seem.

⁴Jesus was crucified on Friday afternoon. When Jesus’ body is taken down from the cross, there isn’t much time left, for no Jew would touch a dead body on the Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday. The Jews of Jesus’

finish the burial preparations before sundown on Friday.

But when Mary arrives, she finds that the large, heavy, round stone blocking the doorway into the tomb has been rolled away.⁵ Something is terribly wrong and, without even looking in the tomb, she races to find Peter and another disciple. After running back to the tomb, the disciples discover that the tomb is empty. And empty in a weird way. The burial cloths that had been used to wrap Jesus' body are still lying on the stone slab. But they aren't piled haphazardly, as if tossed aside when the body was removed. Instead, they look like they had been wrapped around a balloon that had been deflated.

After the other disciples head home, surely perplexed and fearful, Mary stays behind and sits in the garden. She weeps, knowing only that Jesus' body is missing. Yet, she is soon thrust into the post-Easter world. Jesus is no longer dead, he is standing right in front of her in the garden. Mary had even mistaken him for the gardener. She starts to embrace Jesus, but things are not as they had been before. Jesus will not stay with her and the other disciples, he must yet return to the Father. So Mary rushes to tell the other disciples that Jesus' body was not stolen. God had resurrected Jesus. He lives!

Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, has now been resurrected himself. As Paul would put it a couple of decades later, Jesus is "the first fruits of those who have died . . . thanks be to God, who give us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:20, 57). Everything has changed; nothing is the same.

God's Vindication of Jesus

It would be a mistake to see Jesus' resurrection as merely the greatest of all miracles. The resurrection of Jesus was much more than a demonstration of God's power. The resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus.

On Friday afternoon, Jesus hung upon a Roman cross, a failed Messiah condemned as a traitor to Rome. Abandoned by all but a few, Jesus had cried out to God just before his death, "Why have you forsaken me?" To all appearances, Jesus' life and ministry had met an ignoble end. He was despised and rejected and the world "held him of no account" (Isaiah 53:3).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to vindicate someone is to demonstrate that the person is "free of blame, criticism, or doubt." Jesus' crucifixion seemed to dash all hope that this man had been Israel's Messiah. As far the Jews were concerned, there could simply be no such thing as a crucified Messiah.

However, Jesus' resurrection, this defeat of death, was a mind-blowing demonstration that the crucifixion was not all it had seemed. Rather than marking Jesus' failure, the cross was actually the place of God's victory over sin and death. Jesus had not been found guilty in God's law court, he had been found innocent! And, because Jesus stands before God in our place, we too are vindicated, standing before God as forgiven, blameless people.

We live in a post-Easter world, a world that has been, is being, and shall be remade by God. We are called to faith, to place our trust in God as revealed fully in Jesus Christ – and nowhere else. In each of the seven "I am . . ." statements, John has led us deeper and deeper into the truth that is Jesus Christ. He is "the way, the truth, and the life . . . the resurrection and the life." We are invited to experience the love that defeats death, the power that sustains eternal life. Our acceptance of this invitation is our assent to the truth of Jesus' claims and our trust in him; i.e., our faith in Jesus Christ.

Such faith is nurtured by the church. It is here, among diverse people who are all on their own journey that we learn what it means to be a follower of Jesus. But we can't expect to discover God's gifts if our post-Easter plans include only an occasional encounter with the people of God. It is like imagining we can learn to play the piano with a couple of lessons each year. The world clamors for our attention. It demands our priorities. Thus, we must make a conscious and deliberate decision to ground our life in God and live it among disciples of Jesus Christ. Each week offers us a new Easter, a new opportunity to embrace life with a passion that can only be found in the truth, the love, and the life of our Lord.

day practiced a two-stage burial. Jesus' body was to lie in the tomb for a year or so, until only the bones were left. Then, his bones would be collected and placed in an ossuary, a bone box, and placed in a tomb alongside other bone boxes.

⁵Because families needed regular access to first-century tombs, the doors were often blocked with a round stone that could be rolled away if needed but would otherwise keep animals out of the tomb.

Questions for God

A new series in Scott Engle's 11:00 class – begins April 19

Several years ago, we collected questions for God from adults and youth in our congregation. In this series, we'll take a look at some of these questions and strive to better understand what sort of answers we might find, and not find, in the pages of Scripture.

April 19: "If you are an all-loving God, loving each and every person, how can you let innocent children die from disease and starvation across the world? What purpose does it serve?" (from an adult)

April 26: "What can I do to improve my chances of being with you in heaven?" (from a 6th-grader)

Daily Bible Readings

In 2007, the Lenten sermon series was drawn from John's Gospel. We read through the Gospel that year and the daily readings for this Lent will again take us through the Gospel.

Monday, John 18:1-27 What is the reaction of the arresting party to Jesus' answer, "I am" (see v. 6 and footnote)? Why is so little made of Jesus' trial before the Jewish authorities?

Tuesday, John 18:28-38a Jesus is taken before Pilate. Why do you think that Pilate is reluctant to execute Jesus? Do you think that Pilate is concerned about the possibility of taking an innocent life?

Wednesday, John 18:38b – 19:16 Why are the Jewish leaders so anxious to crucify Jesus? Why do you think the crowds have turned on Jesus so quickly? Note the damning admission of the Jewish leaders in v. 15. They were to have no king but God!

Thursday, John 19:17-19:42 Who is with Jesus as he hangs on the cross? Where are Peter and the others? Why do the soldiers plan to break Jesus legs? Why do they not go through with it?

Friday, John 20:1-18 What does Mary think has happened to Jesus' body? Why might someone take it? Why do you think Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener?

Saturday, John 20:19-31 Jesus had promised his disciples that another one, the Holy Spirit, would come after him. Here, the Holy Spirit arrives. What have the disciples told Thomas about Jesus? Thomas' confession in v. 28 is the first time that someone calls Jesus "God" in the gospel.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Few New Testament concepts are as difficult for us to grasp as the claim that we live in a "not yet/already" reality. That the kingdom of God, God's victory over sin and death, the "Last Things," have come already, but not yet. So it is with today's passage from John 11. Jesus is both the resurrection and the life, the future and the present. As O'Day puts it, "Jesus defeats death in the future and in the present." It is why Paul makes surprising statements about our having been (past tense!) crucified with Christ and raised with Christ. I can't overemphasize the importance of this "already/not yet" perspective. How would you put this in your own words? How would you try to explain it to someone else? The June 29, 2003, Weekly Bible Study focuses on this topic and even has pictures. You can find it www.thebibleacademy.com. You might read it and see if it helps. Finally, why do you think this is so important?
2. What does Easter, Jesus' bodily resurrection, really mean to you now? God created a physical world and pronounced it good. God created us in God's image. The "life after life-after-death" that God promises each of us is a gloriously transformed, but still physical, life. How might this change our view of the present world? Of our own bodies? Of our responsibilities in this world? There are many people who want to convince us that what really matters in life is the spiritual not the physical. What does our Easter proclamation say to them?
3. God's work of new creation goes on still. Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ – New Creation! The old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). What evidence do you see in our world of God's work of new creation? Where do you see glimpses of God's kingdom in the world around us? If we are to build for God's kingdom, to what work has God called you?