

Today is week 6 in our Gospel of John series... and what we have discovered in the first 5 weeks of this series is that the Gospel of John is a book that leaves no space for middle ground: we have already heard many times during this series that the Gospel of John tells us that there is light in the world and there is darkness... there is life and there is death... there is flourishing and there is perishing... and as we've been saying each week John continually challenges his readers to respond to this question, 'What do you believe about Jesus?' and here too, John says there is no middle ground... you either believe or you don't. And I must tell you that today's passage will be no different... well, it **is** different from all of the passages we've looked at up to now in the substance of what happens, but ultimately it will ask the same questions: What do you believe about Jesus? Are you in or are you out? Now, I know that I'm starting out rather seriously today... but there is a reason I want to get right to it. You see, today's passage, which by the way is the 11th chapter of John, the story called the Raising of Lazarus, is a passage that has two distinctives: **first**, it is tremendously important because it tells us about the final and most stunning of all of Jesus' miracles and **second**, next to the passage that tells us about Jesus' death and resurrection, it is the longest passage in the Gospel of John... it's 54 verses long! The 11th Chapter of John is important and it's long, so I need to get right to it if we are going to cover it today! So, let's turn to John 11 and we'll get going.

Now, as I said, this passage is called 'The Raising of Lazarus.' By 'raising' it means 'raising Lazarus from the dead.' And as I said, this is the last place in this gospel where we see Jesus performing a miracle... and what a miracle it turns out to be: Water into wine is cool... healing the sick and giving sight to the blind is remarkable... feeding 5000 people by multiplying 5 barley loaves and 2 small fish is amazing... and walking on water is, well, completely unexpected. But raising a dead man back to life... now we're into completely different territory, territory that demands special attention!

So, here we go... oh wait... before we dive into this passage, I need to tell you a couple of things about the 1st-Century-Jewish-world that should help make sense of some of the details in this story. First, and you'll know why I am telling you this in a moment, 1st Century people knew when someone was dead. I know that this story takes place in the 'ancient' world and the people in the ancient world believed a lot of things that we now know aren't true... but that doesn't mean that ancient people were clueless about whether someone was dead or not. Now, yes, there may have been some incredibly rare moments when they thought someone was dead and it turned out that they weren't... but let's not be so condescending as to think that just because certain people lived during ancient times, they couldn't tell if someone was dead or still alive! But, with that said, 1st Century Jewish people did believe that a person's spirit, the part of our being that gives us life, hovered over a dead person's body for up to 3 days in the hopes of reviving the body. They also believed that after 3 days of decomposition the dead person's face became unrecognizable and once the spirit couldn't recognize the person any longer, it left, and it never returned. In other words, giving life back to a dead person was impossible after 3 days. I tell you this because there were dark-magic sorcerers at that time that claimed to be able to raise the dead during that 3-day window... but it was a really creepy practice. It involved drilling a hole in the dead person's body in the dead of night and pouring boiling blood and froth from a dog's mouth into the hole. Now, there is no reliable record of this practice ever working, but we do have copies of the instructions for raising the dead as well as records of people hiring sorcerers to try and raise the dead. So, while some who practiced dark magic claimed that it was possible to bring a person back from the dead, everyone knew that after day three all bets were

off. This is all important to this story... So, let's read verse 1 of John 11. Like I said earlier, this is a long passage, but here we go!

A man named Lazarus was sick. He lived in Bethany with his sisters, Mary and Martha. ² This is the Mary who later poured the expensive perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair. Her brother, Lazarus, was sick. ³ So the two sisters sent a message to Jesus telling him, "Lord, your dear friend is very sick."

There were two villages called Bethany at that time, one on the east side of the Jordan River and one on the west side of the Jordan near Jerusalem... and they were about 20 miles, or one day's walk, apart. We read earlier in John that Jesus and his disciples were staying near the Bethany on the east side of the Jordan and Lazarus and his sisters lived in the Bethany near Jerusalem. Also, the word that gives us 'dear friend' is the same word that is used to say that the disciple John was the 'beloved' friend of Jesus... so, this tells us that Lazarus was very dear to Jesus and he was very sick, of what we don't know, but the sister's message to Jesus clearly said they wanted him to come right away and heal their brother.

⁴ But when Jesus heard about it, he said, "Lazarus's sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this." ⁵ So although Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, ⁶ he stayed where he was for the next two days.' Now, Jesus saying, Lazarus' sickness would not end in death most likely settled any concerns the disciples might have had for Lazarus. The Greek tells us that Lazarus was their friend too, and I'm sure they were thinking, 'Jesus is surely going to heal our dear friend.' But the story changes quickly... verse 7 says, ⁷ Finally, he said to his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." Now, John doesn't tell us this, but it becomes obvious as the story develops that Lazarus must have died sometime during the day the messenger traveled from the eastern Bethany to the western Bethany. If the messenger traveled one day, and Jesus then waited 2 more days and now he says, 'Let's make the day-long trip back to Judea,' that means it would have been four days, or one day past Lazarus' spirit leaving for good... or so everyone believed... when Jesus finally gets to the western Bethany! Verse 8 says this though, ⁸ But his disciples objected. "Rabbi," they said, "only a few days ago the people in Judea were trying to stone you. Are you going there again?" You can read about the people in Judea picking up stones to kill Jesus in the last verses of the chapter right before this passage, and to be honest, the disciples objecting to going back to Judea makes perfect sense. But in verse 9 we read, ⁹ Jesus replied, "There are twelve hours of daylight every day. During the day people can walk safely. They can see because they have the light of this world. ¹⁰ But at night there is danger of stumbling because they have no light. Now, I know that some people try to spiritualize these two verses, but I'm pretty sure all Jesus was saying to the disciples was something like, 'Everything is going to be fine. We'll travel in the daylight and stay away from the dangers of traveling in the dark. Come on now, let's go to Lazarus.' But then he added, ¹¹ "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but now I will go and wake him up." ¹² The disciples said, "Lord, if he is sleeping, he will soon get better!" ¹³ They thought Jesus meant Lazarus was simply sleeping, but Jesus meant Lazarus had died. ¹⁴ So he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. People still say that someone has 'fallen sleeping' when what they mean is someone has died... and Jesus, at first, used this common, but somewhat confusing phrase 'fallen asleep' to speak of what had happened to Lazarus. You see, his disciples, like most people in the 1st Century, believed that a good night of deep sleep brought healing to the sick, so you can see how Jesus' statement confused them. But then Jesus made certain they knew exactly what he meant by saying directly, 'Lazarus is dead.' And he then went on to say something that once again probably confused the disciples. ¹⁵ And for your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there, for

now you will really believe. Come, let's go see him." Jesus clearly knew what was about to happen even if his disciples were confused. And he also adds that waking Lazarus up... from the dead... will finally make real believers out of them. And now we are getting to the real question of the moment for Jesus. Do his disciples really believe that Jesus can give people life... as in life after they've been dead for 4 days? Do they believe he has this kind of power and authority from God? ¹⁶ Thomas, nicknamed the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let's go, too—and die with Jesus." We already know why Thomas was less than enthusiastic about going back to Judea... he didn't want to be stoned... but at least Thomas was willing to go with Jesus no matter what the outcome.

John doesn't tell us anything about their day traveling to Bethany. The next verse simply says, ¹⁷ When Jesus arrived at Bethany, he was told that Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was only a few miles (two to be exact) down the road from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many of the people had come to console Martha and Mary in their loss. This gathering of many mourners was expected in the Jewish culture... we know a lot about Jewish funerals and mourning practices, but for now the most important thing to keep in mind is that whatever Jesus was about to do it was going to happen publicly in front of what the Greek tells us was 'many Jews from Jerusalem!' ²⁰ When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. Martha was certain that Jesus could have healed her brother, who, by the way, was most likely about the same age as Jesus, about 33 or so. Also, we read of no parents or other siblings in this story... and that most likely means Lazarus, as an only son, would have been responsible for taking care of his two sisters. This is a tragic death for Martha and Mary... but even in her great grief what Martha says next shows that she still believed that Jesus had power from God to heal... "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask." She still believed in him, even though she knew that what she really wanted from Jesus couldn't happen... Lazarus had been dead for too long. ²³ Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ "Yes," Martha said, "he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day." Martha thinks that Jesus is trying to comfort her by talking about that coming future day that most Jews believed in then... that coming day when God's kingdom finally arrives, and all Jews would be resurrected into new life in the Kingdom of God together... she wasn't thinking at all that Jesus could bring her brother back from the dead right then. But Jesus sure was! Look at what he says next! ²⁵ Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. ²⁶ Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?" ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she told him. "I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God." One thing for certain, she had this right. This is about as strong a statement of who Jesus is as we find in all the Gospel of John. But it is hard to tell what she thought Jesus was saying to her since her first thought was to go and get her sister. ²⁸ Then she returned to Mary. She called Mary aside from the mourners and told her, "The Teacher is here and wants to see you." Now, I have to tell you that all of this going out to Jesus was highly unusual. What was expected was for Jesus to go into Martha and Mary's home and give them his condolences, but these two women so respected Jesus that they broke protocol and, as verse 29 tells us *Mary immediately went to him.* ³⁰ Jesus had stayed outside the village, at the place where Martha met him. ³¹ When the people who were at the house consoling Mary saw her leave so hastily, they assumed she was going to Lazarus's grave to weep. So, they followed her there. ³² When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." Once again,

the issue is, ‘Why didn’t you get here sooner and heal Lazarus, Jesus?’ ³³ *When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled.* ³⁴ *“Where have you put him?” he asked them. They told him, “Lord, come and see.”* ³⁵ *Then Jesus wept.* ³⁶ *The people who were standing nearby said, “See how much he loved him!”* ³⁷ *But some said, “This man healed a blind man. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?”* There is so much we could say about these verses. For today I think the main point for us is how much of Jesus’ humanity is on public display in this moment. It isn’t a coincidence that a great number of people were present to witness Jesus’ tears over losing a dear friend... nor is it a coincidence that some in the crowd were criticizing him. Still, Jesus simply grieved with these 2 sisters. This is comforting to me. But let’s move on to verse 38. ³⁸ *Jesus was still angry as he arrived at the tomb, a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance.* Scholars debate why Jesus was so angry... the Greek here is literally more like, ‘Groaning like a snorting stallion Jesus comes to the tomb.’ I can’t tell you exactly what was going on with Jesus here, but it is clear that Jesus knew it was time for action. ³⁹ *“Roll the stone aside,” Jesus told them. But Martha, the dead man’s sister, protested, “Lord, he has been dead for four days. The smell will be terrible.”* You can see that these ancient people knew that he was really dead. ⁴⁰ *Jesus responded, “Didn’t I tell you that you would see God’s glory if you believe?”* ⁴¹ *So they rolled the stone aside.* I’m sure very reluctantly, by the way. *Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me.* ⁴² *You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me.”* ⁴³ *Then Jesus shouted, “Lazarus, come out!”* ⁴⁴ *And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, “Unwrap him and let him go!”* ⁴⁵ *Many of the people who were with Mary believed in Jesus when they saw this happen.*

Ok then... that would have been something to see! And apparently a big crowd of people saw it. There is so much we could say about these verses. Some scholars focus on the fact that this is the only time in the Gospel of John that Jesus prays out loud before a miracle. Okay? Other scholars focus on why Lazarus came out of the grave still wrapped up in his graveclothes. That is an interesting discussion. Others focus on the fact that we get no reaction from anyone at all other than John saying that many people believed in Jesus... You’d think there would have at least been a bit of happy applause. What we do know is that word about what had happened spread like wildfire... and well it should have! Jesus had given life back to a man who had been dead for four days... a man who was so well known in the community that a great number of people were at his home mourning his death four days after his burial. This well-known man had been publicly raised from the dead by someone who certainly wasn’t a magician... he didn’t drill any holes or collect dog froth... all Jesus had to do was command Lazarus to come out and Lazarus came out! It’s no wonder that this news about Lazarus blew up everywhere and many people believed in Jesus.

We don’t have time to talk about the next 8 verses. I do want to summarize them for you quickly though. It is true that a good number of people believed in Jesus following his raising Lazarus from the dead, but others, particularly the Pharisees, were completely thrown off by this. Actually, ‘thrown off’ isn’t the right way to say it. They were scared to death by it... this raising of Lazarus so threatened their power and their position that John tells us that they began plotting to kill Jesus **and** Lazarus. And I don’t think John gave us these ironic details by accident; once again John was saying there is one who gives life and there are those who give death... there is light in the world and there is darkness... and, again, it all cycles around what you believe about Jesus.

And speaking of what we believe about Jesus, even though we don't ever hear a single word from Lazarus, my bet is that if you'd asked him what he believed about Jesus he'd have quoted Jesus and said something like, 'I can tell you for a fact that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Take my word for it, anyone who believes in him will live, even after dying. I'm living proof!'

So, what does this story have to say to us? Well, first off, I can't think of a more powerful way for Jesus to show us that he came to give us life and to conquer death. So, I guess the first question is do you believe this about Jesus? If you were here last week you heard Barry say that the Greek concept of 'believing' wasn't simply some sort of rational, mental assent like we think of belief today; 'believing' also meant surrendering your life to and placing your faith in the one you believe... and that someone would be Jesus. There are a number of times in this passage that Martha and Mary refer to Jesus as 'Lord' and all the scholars say that this was simply a social courtesy... it didn't mean anything special. That may be... but I can tell you after Jesus brought Lazarus back to them from the dead, when they called Jesus 'Lord' it meant more than a simple courtesy... it meant they had surrendered completely to him. Again, the question is have you done this? Have you given Jesus the chance to give you life?

Or are you here today thinking your life is too far gone... you're 4-days-dead already. Well, this story tells us that Jesus can give anyone new life, even those who it seems are beyond hope. Again, the question is, 'Do you believe that Jesus came to give new life to anyone... no matter how hopeless that might seem?'

A few weeks ago, Maron mentioned briefly that there was a direct connection between the first Egyptian plague of Moses, turning water to blood, and the first miracle of Jesus was turning water into wine... Moses first did something that brought death and Jesus first did something that brings life. Well, what is also true is that Moses' last Egyptian plague took of the life of the first-born sons of Egypt and Jesus' last miracle was gave life back to Lazarus, who from all we can tell was the first-born son in his family. Again, we move from death to life... and the question, again, is do you believe that Jesus is still giving life... and not just life in the next 'world' like Martha was assuming, but life, full and wonderful and joyous... today? If this sounds like it is all too much to believe, may I make a suggestion? Would you think about attending Barry's Bible Study for Skeptics on Monday the ??? It will be an opportunity to ask the hard questions and think through the difficulties of life and faith and such. But in the end, it all comes down to one thing: Do you believe that Jesus came to give **you** life? Bottom line, either he did, or he didn't. It's just that simple... and can I tell you, as one who was at one time considered by many to also be 4-days-dead, I can tell you, along with Lazarus, that we believe that Jesus was absolutely telling the truth when he said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life... full and wonderful and joyous life... life both for today and forever!