

**“Ain’t No Grave”**  
**John 11:38-44**  
**April 17, 2022**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

If I had it to do over again, I would retitl e last week’s Palm Sunday sermon, “Ain’t No Rock.” It’s a reference to Jesus’ response to the Pharisees who wanted him to rebuke his followers when they said, **“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest”** (Luke 19:38). Jesus responded, **“I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out”** (Luke 19:40). That verse is the basis of a James Ward song, “Ain’t no rock gonna cry in my place; as long as I’m alive I’ll glorify his holy name.” Palm Sunday, the opening day of Holy Week, declares to us that Jesus is the true King.

Today we celebrate Easter, and the sermon title is taken from another song that captures something of the defiant attitude that is appropriate to this glorious day. “Ain’t no grave” is the first line of the chorus of an old spiritual that goes like this: “Ain’t no grave gonna hold my body down. When I hear that trumpet sound I’m gonna rise up outta the ground. There ain’t no grave gonna hold my body down.” There is a note of defiance to those words, the kind of defiance we read of in Paul’s words when he wrote of the resurrection, quoting Isaiah, **“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”** (1 Cor. 15:55).

This same note of defiance can be heard in the actions and words of Jesus in the seventh and climactic miracle of Jesus recorded in John’s Gospel. We can almost feel Hell shaking as Jesus orders the stone to be taken away that is covering the tomb of his friend, Lazarus. The reign of terror from Satan, holding people in bondage to the fear of death, will soon be ended, and the raising of Lazarus is a sign of things to come.

Jesus is our champion, coming to defeat our enemies. Death is more than a theoretical problem. It is personal to us all. Jesus here comes to his friends, those he loves, to minister to them in their sorrows and fears. He comes to us as well, today and every day, with the good news of Palm Sunday and Easter. Palm Sunday’s good news is that Jesus is the true King, worthy of all our trust, obedience and praise. Easter’s good news is that glorious news of hope. Let’s look at how Jesus ministered this good news to his friends, and how he does so to us as well.

**I. Patience**

Death is such a certain part of life that we have a hard time imagining its reversal in the form of resurrection. Everyone in this story resists the clear assertions from Jesus about the raising of Lazarus, but Jesus is patient with them all. Mary and Martha send an urgent message to Jesus that Lazarus, their brother, was ill. It is clear that they expected Jesus to come and heal Lazarus. Jesus does two things that seem contradictory. He announces that Lazarus will live, and he delays going to him. But after two days, he determines that it is time to go to Judea to attend to Lazarus. Jesus is clear with them about the situation. **“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him”** (v. 11). They misunderstand, thinking that the ability to sleep is a good thing, indicating that Lazarus must be improving. So Jesus corrects their misunderstanding with the plain statement, **“Lazarus has died.”**

When Jesus arrives near Mary and Martha’s home, both sisters greet him at different times but with the same words. **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”** (v. 21, 32). There may be a little complaint hidden in those words. “Jesus, what took you so long? All of our hopes were on your arrival before he died so you could heal him. But now it’s too late.” So Jesus spoke directly to Martha, **“Your brother will rise again.”** She misunderstands him to be speaking about a resurrection in the far-off future. It's obvious that she never realizes that Jesus intends to raise her brother right here and now, because when Jesus orders the stone to be rolled away, she objects on the grounds that there will be the smell of death. There is no indication that Mary is any different than her sister. The others who were with them had a similar attitude. For the third time, and this time it seems to have a stronger tone of criticism, they complain, **“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”** (v. 37).

It seems that no one was prepared for the good thing Jesus was about to do, and yet Jesus is patient with them all. Imagine a husband and wife with a married son who is poor and living in a house that is in a sad state of disrepair. So every time the parents visit their son, they take a couple of bags of groceries with them to leave with their son and his family. One day they show up with no groceries, and the son and his wife are a little upset about that. He asks his dad, “Did you bring any groceries?” His father replies, “Not today; but I brought you something else.” He takes out of his pocket a set of keys to the new house he's just bought for his son and his family. When we lose sight of the resurrection, we are like that son being upset at no groceries when he was being given a much better gift. Jesus is patient with us too, and deals with us in a way similar to what he did with Mary and Martha.

## **II. Truth (to Martha)**

Jesus knows us well, and he knows that what Martha needs is truth. As she faced this tragedy of her brother’s death, Jesus knew that it was truth that

would comfort her. Despite his plain words to her about his intentions to raise Lazarus from the dead, Martha wasn't understanding the immediacy of the act. So Jesus said to her the well-known truths of verse 25. **"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."** What a glorious truth. Death is not the end. It's not even the beginning of the end. Rather, it is the end of the beginning. In the words of George Herbert that I mentioned a few weeks ago, Jesus has turned death from an executioner to a gardener. When we die, it is like planting a seed in the ground. It looks to be a death, but actually turns out to be a new beginning promising future fruitfulness.

It's hard to imagine how Jesus could have been more clear. There is life after death, and it is never-ending. When Jesus says that he is the resurrection and the life, he means both that he is the author of this resurrection and the pattern for it. This is why we believe in a bodily resurrection. The truth of Jesus counters the lies of the devil and of our culture. These lies are that the only reality is the material, and once this material body dies, that's just the end. This lie has had a huge negative impact on our culture, cutting people off from any deeper meaning in life, leading to great despair. We need truth.

### **III. Emotional Connection (to Mary)**

When Jesus comes to Mary, he doesn't say a word. What he does instead is to connect with her emotionally. We see two emotions from Jesus in this passage: anger and sorrow. Verse 33 says that when Jesus saw Mary and all her friends weeping, **"he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled."** D. A. Carson says it should be translated 'outraged in spirit.' The same word is used in Greek outside the Bible to refer to the angry snorting and bellowing of an animal. Jesus is angry because he created this world in order for mankind to have a full life of fellowship with him. But Satan came into the world and destroyed it all, bringing death and sin. Jesus rises up in anger, bellowing like an angry animal. As he commands the stone to be rolled away, he reminds me of King David running to meet Goliath. David was filled with indignation that this man should defy the armies of Israel. Goliath was standing against the glory of God. Like David, Jesus comes as our champion to fight this great enemy, an enemy before whom we all quake with fear. He shouts with triumph, **"Lazarus, come out!"** As someone has said, the authority of Jesus is so great that had he not specified Lazarus, all the tombs would have given up their dead.

In addition to anger, Jesus shows another unexpected emotion—sorrow. Jesus weeps with Mary because a mark of love is to weep with those who are weeping. He weeps even though he knows he is about to raise her brother from the dead. We need a God like this, one who is both truth and love. We could never trust him if he were only one of these. If God just feels our pain but

doesn't tell us the truth, we couldn't trust him with running our lives. He may be well-intentioned, but well-intentioned people can mess up. If he tells the truth but doesn't sympathize with us, then he is distant. How can we know that he will use his truth and power for our benefit unless we know he is for us? Jesus is God, and to know him is to know the Father. So when we see Jesus' emotions at the death of his friend, we learn that God responds emotionally to the sufferings and tragedies that so fill this world. He is not an unfeeling God.

This is all a bit baffling to us. Why does Jesus weep when he knows he is about to raise Lazarus? We would think he might say to Mary, "There's no need to weep. Watch what I'm about to do." Jesus is able to end the source of the weeping, and in fact proceeds to do so in the raising of Lazarus. But still he weeps. This tells us a great deal about God's response to the suffering and evil currently present in the world. He is able to end it and will in fact do so. But still he weeps. He has larger purposes in mind of which we are ignorant. What we can do is to receive his comfort, the comfort of truth and love from him, even as we trust him to end all suffering in his good time.

#### **IV. An Invitation to Faith**

The question Jesus asks Martha is the same one he asks us all. **"Do you believe this?"** (v. 26). He is asking her if she believes his assertion, **"I am the resurrection and the life."** To understand faith, it is helpful to understand its opposite. John spends much more time describing unbelief following Jesus' miracle than he does describing belief. We might think that after such a miracle as the raising of Lazarus that everyone witnessing it would believe. John records that many in fact did believe (v. 45). But then he adds, **"but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done"** (v. 46). An emergency council meeting was called to deal with what they perceived as a crisis. Here was the problem, as they saw it. **"What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation"** (v. 47-48).

The unbelief of this group of Jewish leaders refutes one of the reasons people often give for not believing. They claim that they need more evidence. Jesus' half brothers thought this was the case when they urged him to go to Jerusalem and perform his miracles in a more open manner among the powerful and influential elite of that nation. They were confident that were he to do so, they would all believe. Many make the same mistake today. They wonder why Jesus doesn't come to earth and make an appearance on television and do some miraculous sign. What if he were to say, "Watch this. I will now bring an immediate end to the war in Ukraine." And then we watch as hostilities cease and the Russian army returns to its homeland. We think that

if God were to do something like that, that everyone would believe in him. The unbelieving response to the raising of Lazarus reveals the truth. The source of unbelief is not the lack of evidence. What more evidence could people have had than the raising of a man who had been dead for four days. We even read later in John that these leaders not only wanted to kill Jesus, but Lazarus as well (12:10). Evidence of Jesus' divinity was not their friend, taking them to a place of faith, but their enemy needing to be eradicated.

If their unbelief was not due to lack of evidence, what was its source? It becomes clear in the deliberations of the council that the thing most important to them is the preservation of their own positions of authority. Their core desire was not to lose their power. They had a self-centered agenda, and anyone getting in the way of that agenda, including God himself, must be removed. The thing that keeps us from believing in God isn't lack of evidence, but the core commitment to self. The heart of evil isn't something blatantly vile, but rather a core commitment to self. The core ingredient of faith is to begin to lose your confidence that you know best, and to see that replaced with a newfound confidence in the Lord. It is to bet all the marbles on Jesus and his promise of new, eternal life.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In 1934, 12-year-old Claude Ely was dying of tuberculosis. As his family surrounded him, he began to sing the song our praise team is going to sing in a few minutes. "Ain't no grave gonna hold my body down. Ain't no grave gonna hold my body down. When I hear that trumpet sound, gonna get up outta this ground. Ain't no grave gonna hold my body down." Claude eventually recovered so completely that he grew up to become a singer and preacher known for the powerful volume of his voice. As an adult, he travelled around the South as the "Gospel Ranger," holding revival meetings that would often feature this song. These revivals were more Pentecostal in their character, featuring lots of shouting and dancing. And no wonder. The resurrection of Jesus, and the resurrection promised to those who believe in him, can turn a Presbyterian into a Pentecostal. It is staggeringly good news. In his book, *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis said this. "Jesus has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened."

Do you believe this?

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**John 11:38-44**

1. Do you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus? What reassures you that Jesus was bodily raised?
2. Three times in the story of the raising of Lazarus it was said of Jesus that if he had been there prior to Lazarus' death, that Jesus could have healed him (v. 21, 32, 37). They were disappointed that Jesus didn't arrive "on time," at least according to their ideas of timeliness. What do you think John's point is in reporting this statement three times?
3. Have you ever been disappointed in God not doing something, only to discover later that he did something even better?
4. Why do you think Jesus wept with Mary when he knew that he was about to raise her brother from the dead?
5. Jesus comforts Martha and Mary in different ways, Martha with truth and Mary with emotional connection. Which do you find more comforting, truth or emotional connection?
6. The unbelief on the part of the Jewish leaders, even after witnessing the raising of Lazarus, shows that unbelief doesn't come from a lack of evidence. What do verses 47-48 suggest is the source of unbelief?
7. What do you think George Herbert meant when he said that the death and resurrection of Jesus have changed death from an executioner to a gardener?
8. Conclude by meditating on verses 25-26. What part of these verses encourage and comfort you? "Jesus said to her, '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?'"