

April 2, 2017

Rev. Christine Tiller Bohn, Ph.D.

Timber Ridge Presbyterian Church, Greeneville, Tennessee

[All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.]

John 11:1—7, 17-44  
The Resurrection and the Life

I know almost nothing for certain about my future. I have expectations based on past experience and intentions based on future plans, but there is no certainty that any of my expectations and intentions will come to pass.

One thing that I do know is this: Someday—I don't know when, but I know it will happen (apart from Jesus coming back first)—someday I will be just as stone cold dead as Lazarus was. When that time comes, there is one promise of Jesus that is going to be more important to me than any other. It's the promise that Jesus gave to Martha while her brother Lazarus lay in the tomb, stone cold dead. "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."

Because of this promise of Jesus—this "I am" statement—there is one other thing that I know. I will live in the presence of God forever, because I belong to Jesus—not because I'm a good person (I've got good qualities and bad), not because I did anything right in my lifetime (I've done a few things right and lots of things wrong), but because I belong to Jesus and he is the resurrection and the life.

The raising of Lazarus is the seventh of seven miracles (or signs) that John includes in his account of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Of the first six signs, three were nature miracles—transforming water into wine, transforming a handful of food into a feast for thousands, transforming choppy waves into a walking trail. Three of the six signs were healing miracles, involving a sick boy, a paralyzed man, and a blind man.

There are lots of other examples in the Bible of nature miracles and healing miracles. Jesus calmed storms and found a coin in a fish. Jesus healed lepers, a bleeding woman, a man with a shriveled-up hand, and many more.

The Bible records other nature miracles and healing miracles that happened by the power of God's Spirit before and after Jesus. Joshua called on the sun to stand still, and it did. Elisha sent Naaman to wash in the Jordan and his leprosy was healed.

Paul was being transported to Rome for trial when a great storm wrecked the ship. God promised Paul that none would be harmed. Though the ship was broken to pieces, the waves carried every person on board safely to shore. At the gate of the temple, Peter said to a paralyzed man, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." The man's feet and ankles became strong, and he jumped to his feet and praised God.

The raising of Lazarus is a miracle like no other.

It isn't that Jesus had never acted to restore life before. He returned the breath of life to the daughter of Jairus and to the son of the widow at Nain. But, in each of these cases, the death was a recent one and the corpse had not yet been buried.

There are other cases where God worked through a prophet to return the breath of life to one who had died. Elijah prayed for God to bring the son of the Sidonian widow back to life, and God did. A young man fell out of a third story window and died while Paul was preaching. Paul ran downstairs and threw his arms around the young man's body, and God restored his life.

The raising of Lazarus was different. The Bible describes nothing else like it. Lazarus was dead four days. He was wrapped in burial cloths and laid in a tomb. His body was starting the natural process of decay. He was stone cold dead and gone. At that time, many people believed that the spirit of a person hovered around the body for three days. In that time a miracle might happen, but not after that...certainly not after that.

Jesus arrived after Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. The raising of Lazarus was a miracle like no other.

When Jesus raised the widow's son, who had just died, it was basically a combination healing and nature miracle taken to the extreme. When Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus, who had just died, it was basically a healing and nature miracle taken to the extreme.

When Jesus called Lazarus to come out of the tomb after he was stone cold dead, it was no simple nature miracle and it was no simple healing miracle. It was a miracle like no other. It was a raising, not a resurrection. Lazarus was returned to this life, and he would die again. Still, the raising of Lazarus was a foreshadowing of the resurrection to come.

At the center of John's account of the raising of Lazarus is a promise. Jesus looked Martha in the eyes and made a promise. "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."

There comes a time for every human being when life on this earth is over, when there is no more breath within us, when we are stone cold dead. Whether we were reasonably good or rotten to the core, that time will come. When that time comes, there is one promise of Jesus—one "I am" statement—that is going to be more important than any other. "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."

Jesus looked Martha in the eyes and asked a question. "Do you believe this?"

Martha answered, "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

The same question hangs in the air before each and every human being on this earth. "Do you believe this?"

This question, by the way, is not a question about information but about relationship. To believe that Jesus is the Christ is not merely to agree that is a true statement. If checking "true" on this one-question true/false test has no particular impact on your life, it likely will have no particular impact on your death.

To believe that Jesus is the Christ is to trust that Jesus is the Christ. To believe that Jesus is the Christ is to enter into relationship with him as Savior and Lord, Master and Friend. To believe that Jesus is the Christ results in a changed life. It results in a life that keeps on changing. This is not about flipping a switch but about changing direction. It's about being transformed, bit by bit and step by step, from one who lives separated from God to one who lives--more and more and more--in union with God.

Living in union with God is not the default position. It is not what happens in the natural course of events. What happens in the natural course of events, apart from the supernatural intervention of God, is that human beings, separated from God in life, remain separated from God in death.

Sometimes people ask, “Why would a loving God send people away from him when they die?” God doesn’t send anybody away. Apart from being united with Christ, we are already away—not because God rejected us but because we rebelled against and rejected him. Those who will spend eternity separated from God do so because they already spent their lives on this earth separated from God.

God is loving. He loves us so much—he loves me so much and he loves you so much—that he went to amazing lengths to make a way for us to return to him, to be reconciled with him, and to live in his presence forever.

Jesus Christ left the glory of heaven to be born a human being and walk this earth as one of us. It was a rescue mission. Human beings gave up any right to walk in the presence of God a long, long time ago. We can’t get to God. We desperately need God to come to us. So he did. Jesus Christ, who was one with the Father before creation and before time—Jesus the Christ, who is eternally and forever God—left behind the glory of heaven to enter into the mess of this world. He came on a rescue mission.

When Jesus died on the cross, it was not an unfortunate accident or an unforeseen development. When Jesus died on the cross, it was by the plan and purpose of God. It was what he came to do. With Jesus’ last breath, he cried out, “It is finished!” He had completed what he came in the flesh to do. His rescue mission was a success.

Jesus died on the cross bearing the weight of every human rebellion against God, every human rejection of God, and every destructive consequence that human rebellion and rejection have ever had and ever will have in human relationships with one another and with this amazing creation that God has given us. That’s a heavy burden, and Jesus Christ carried it all. It was all nailed to the cross with him.

Everything that separates human beings from God was nailed to the cross with Jesus. Everything that keeps human beings trapped in rebellion was nailed to the cross with Jesus. Everything that is the power of death in our lives was nailed to the cross with Jesus. Everything that is the power of evil in the world was nailed to the cross with Jesus.

Jesus died and was buried. On the third day, the stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty. Jesus lives.

The cross and the empty tomb were building materials. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God built a bridge to span the chasm between us and God that was caused by our rebellion and rejection. God loves us so much that the Father gave up the Son and the Son gave up his life so that this bridge could be built.

That is God's supernatural intervention, so that human beings, separated from God by our own rebellion can be restored to full and everlasting relationship with God by his grace...so that something that cannot happen in the natural course of events can happen by the power of God's Spirit.

This everlasting relationship that we are invited into does not start after we die. It starts here, in this world. It starts when we are united with Christ by grace through faith. Here, in this world, we are invited to leave behind a life that is away from God and enter into a life that is being transformed more and more and more into a life that is in union with God.

God sends no one away. We are away. God built a bridge so that we might return. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He wasn't saying God will send away those who arrive by another path. He was saying that there is no other path by which to arrive.

This is Jesus' promise: "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."

Do you believe this?