

The resurrection and the life.

Here we are in the fifth Sunday in Lent, and we come to the last of Jesus' miracles recorded in John's gospel. The raising of Lazarus, that we heard of in today's reading, is a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death and resurrection, and it's also a clear indication of who Jesus is: the prophesised messiah, the Son of God, the one who was, as John the Baptist had proclaimed, "...the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

But the story begins by telling us that Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village where he lived with his sisters Mary and Martha. (11:1)

Lazarus, Mary and Martha were friends and followers of Jesus. He stayed in their home when he came to Jerusalem. We know he enjoyed their hospitality.

John tells us that Lazarus was sick. He was very sick – so sick that Mary and Martha sent for Jesus – they knew Jesus, and they believed that Jesus had the power to help their brother.

Jesus didn't respond immediately... in the preceding chapter, John records that Jesus had clashed with the Pharisees the last time he was in Jerusalem – and they'd threatened to stone him or have him arrested (10:31-33, 39).

When word of Lazarus' condition reached him, Jesus didn't rush back. Instead, Jesus declared, "...his sickness will not end in death." (11:4) and waited. And waited. For two days he waited, and then said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

Even then, the disciples were worried about what might await them there "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" (11:8)

But go back they did, and on his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days (11:17).

It seemed it was too late. Mary and Martha heard that Jesus was coming... and how do you think they felt? They loved Jesus, he was their friend, and he would be able to offer them some sort of comfort... but they knew him as one who had the power to save, but he'd chosen not to rush back. Their feelings would have been mixed, to say the least. Martha went out to meet him, but Mary stayed home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

She knew Jesus could have saved Lazarus. I imagine there was even some anger in her words to Jesus... "if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

But then she seems to soften, "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

And Jesus responds by assuring her that her brother will rise again.

That's an assurance that's often given when we lose people we love, isn't it? You will be reunited with those you love in the next life, or in heaven, or in the new heaven and the new earth. And, as Christians, we do have that assurance.

From Jesus, later in John's gospel, "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." (14:2)

From the prophet Isaiah 26:19, "Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; for your dew is like the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead."

From Revelation 7:9 "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands."

But no matter the assurance of rising again, it doesn't take away the pain of loss.

Martha took Jesus' assurance to refer to the general belief among the Jewish people at the time.

So Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." (11:24)

But that is not what Jesus was talking about.

Just as a couple of chapters before, as we heard in church last week, a man's blindness was an opportunity for Jesus demonstrate the power of God to give sight to the blind (John 9:1-41), so Lazarus' death gave give Jesus an opportunity to demonstrate the power of God over death itself.

We hold that God doesn't cause bad things to happen to innocent people, but we know that God can use misfortune to bless us in unexpected ways, if we turn to him.

Jesus makes this bold statement, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." (John 11:25-26a)

No one else in all of history has ever been able to make such a statement. It is one of the great statements of what Christians believe. Jesus is the Lord of life - disease and death cannot stand against him.

Jesus then asks Martha, "Do you believe this?" (11:25-26)

It was a question for Martha – but it's also a question for us. Do we believe this?

When you go to a funeral – and that is when you're most likely to hear those words of Jesus quoted - and hear those words of Jesus, do you think, "Nice words of comfort" or do you think, "Yes, that's what I believe"?

Martha went back to the house and told Mary that Jesus had arrived. Mary went out to him, and said the same thing that her sister had said earlier “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (11:32)

This time though, Jesus reacted differently, and John tells us: When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. (11:33-34)

Jesus was confronted not just with Martha, but with Mary and all those who were with her, in deep grief. He felt that grief too – he was deeply moved and troubled. He knew that it was going to be okay... but even so, he felt their pain, and he joined them.

And we have that shortest of all bible verses, John 11:35, which says simply, “Jesus wept.”

He wept with Mary and Martha and all the others. He didn’t tell them to ‘pull it together’ or criticize them for not having enough faith in him or whatever. He wept with them. And he weeps with us when we grieve too.

The Greek verb originally used here literally means “to quake.” Jesus didn’t simply get shed a few tears; but he was physically shaking with anguish.

When Jesus was confronted with the death of a close friend and saw the anguish of those around, he wept, and so must we.

John goes on to say that Jesus went to the tomb. When he got there, he asked that the stone be taken away. Martha objected. She said, “by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.” (11:39)

Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

They rolled the stone away. Jesus looked to God and prayed. Then he called out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” (11:43). And Lazarus came out. His body was still wrapped in his burial clothes. Jesus said, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” (11:44)

You don’t get much more miraculous than that, do you? Lazarus was dead. There was no mistake. He’d been sealed in his tomb for four days. And yet, at Jesus’ command, he walked out.

It was a miracle and a clear display of God’s power. It was also an unmistakable sign that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ.

And that’s where our reading today ended. But it’s not where the story ends.

In the next few verses, John tells us that many people saw what Jesus did, and believed in him, but others went to Pharisees and reported Jesus’ actions.

In the eyes of the Pharisees and those who supported them, it was the last straw. But for those who believed, it was the beginning of new life.

Jesus had said to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this? (John 11:25-26)

The raising of Lazarus points to Jesus’ own resurrection, but it also points to ours. If Jesus can raise Lazarus from the dead - four days dead - he can bring us to new life, as well.

Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Is that a meaningless saying? Is it a nice assurance to have? Or do you believe it as truth?

Amen.