

A matter of life and death.

We are thinking this morning about Life and death.

In my day job I have seen many dead bodies, some of whom had been people I knew, and a few times I have been there as someone died.

Its amazing how different the body looks just a few minutes after the last breath. We can recognise death.

Life is more tricky:

The New Testament uses two words for Life

Bios and Zoë,

Bios is physical life, which needs to constantly take in resources to be maintained.

Zoë is Spiritual life which comes from God.

Bios will cease, our bodies will die, but if we are filled with God's Zoë life we will go on living even though our bodies die.

Through Jesus, God incorporates our biological lives into his higher, greater Zoe life.

"Our destiny is beyond the physical, not by diminution or rejection of the physical but by its inclusion in a higher dimension of reality, the very Life of God " CS Lewis.

In today's readings we have people at two different stages of death.

In the Old Testament we heard of the valley of dry bones. No matter the arguments about the definition of life, the dry bones are definitely dead. Ezekiel's vision is an extended metaphor addressing the despair and hopelessness, the spiritual death of the Israelite community, which has been taken into captivity in Babylon.

In the vision God brings life and restoration to the dead bones. **Nothing is too dead for God to restore life**

In the New Testament we hear about the death and restoration of Lazarus, this is the seventh of the 'signs' in John's gospel, Signs of God's new creation, signs that God brings life to the spiritually and physically dead.

**Nothing is too dead for God to restore life**

Lets look at the passage in John 11. Jesus has just escaped from Judea where the Jews were trying to stone him. has gone across the Jordan, away from the Jewish religious authorities.

Then he gets a message from his good friends Mary and Martha: These are Jesus good friends, who live a little outside Jerusalem in Bethany (there are two Bethany's in the bible- the other is across the Jordan).

Jesus stayed at their house, he had dinner parties there, Martha bustles about organizing everything, Mary sits at Jesus feet and learns, causing tension between them.

Martha and Mary send the message "Lord, The one you love is sick."

This is the only time that Jesus is said to love an individual

This is why some theologians have suggested that Lazarus, rather than John, is "the beloved disciple", and the author of what we know as John's gospel

Jesus heard his best friend was near death.

"Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus, SO when he heard Lazarus was sick he ..."

Jumped on the nearest donkey  
Rushed to his bedside?

NO Jesus "stayed away two further days...."

EH?

Seems inhuman, but Jesus has a plan. He **chose** to stay away, he deliberately lingered where he was.

Jesus wanted Lazarus to be clearly dead and known to have been entombed, so that there could be no possibility that Lazarus had simply been revived from near death.

The local belief at the time was that the spirit stayed around the body until day three, now it is day 4 and the sisters are in despair.

Lazarus was really dead.

How did it feel for the sisters? they send for Jesus and he doesn't come, doesn't turn up until it is apparently too late, Mary and Martha must have felt despair for those two days Jesus stayed away as Lazarus deteriorated and died, were they angry with Jesus for not intervening. Remember they didn't know the end of the story!

They felt abandoned by Jesus when their requests weren't met...an echo here of the Easter Saturday experience, an echo for all whose prayers haven't been answered, who have felt abandoned by God, BUT God's timing is perfect even when we can't see why he delays...

The disciples are naturally worried about going back to Judea, when they were just there they nearly got stoned to death.

Jesus says Lazarus is asleep  
The disciples say Oh good, if he's sleeping that's a good sign, he'll get better  
No says Jesus he's not resting he's Resting IN Peace, Lazarus is died.  
Jesus is speaking on a more spiritual plane to the disciples entirely practical minds.

So they set off.  
Jesus meets Martha on the way  
"Lord, if you were here, my brother would not have died"  
I wish we had a video recording, emoticons for this, is Martha simply stating a fact, or hurt and scolding Jesus for delaying, or tearful?

Jesus responds with a general statement about resurrection, drawing Martha into deeper commitment.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;<sup>26</sup> and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

<sup>27</sup> "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

*It is a sign of how differently Jesus treats women compared to other Rabbi's, he teaches Mary as she sits in the position of a disciple, when the Jewish teaching was, 'The words of Torah should burn rather than be taught to women.'*  
*(Yerushalmi, Sotah 3:4.)*  
*here Rabbi Jesus shockingly has a conversation with a woman who is not a relative, and then makes a major declaration of his identity... to a woman.*

and Martha gives a great statement of belief and trust in Jesus  
'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

Jesus says "**I am the resurrection and the life**"

Life in Christ is Zoë; it is a new quality a new dimension of life.

Lazarus will eventually die again, each of our bodies will die, our biological life will end, but our life in Christ will go on and on.

Next Jesus meets Mary and the mourners who have followed her from the house. She repeats Martha's words: "Lord, if you were here, my brother would not have died" bursts into tears and falls at Jesus feet.

Jesus is very moved, upset and agitated. The Greek here is strong Jesus “*shuddered with sadness*,” so much so that his body *shook* with emotion. This word in classical Greek is linked to the noise a horse makes when it snorts. When a horse snorts, the horse’s *whole* body shakes; and so Jesus’ *whole* body shook or shuddered with emotion.

What is Jesus distressed angry at? Death? Lazarus death? Their unbelief? All have been suggested.

**Jesus wept.** Jesus shares fully in the grief of Mary and Martha, even though he knows what he will do next. Not a single manly tear down his rugged cheek. The verb again is strong, Jesus burst into tears. He wasn’t insulated from the pain and distress, Jesus grieved with Martha and Mary, even as he prepared to bring Lazarus back.

The Christian life is life to the full, it is a whole human life, and that includes pain, sorrow and grief as well as joy and gladness. Whenever we love we will feel loss and we will grieve; grief is a natural part of human life, Jesus can walk with us through our grief, because he has known human grief. Even though we know we will see our loved ones again at the end of time, it doesn’t prevent us feeling loss and grief.

And we pray, we want God to act, to heal our loved ones, to intervene and stop the developing tragedy, as the mourners say “Jesus healed the blind man, Couldn’t he have healed Lazarus also.”

We can hear the **why** questions flying around;

Why didn’t you come when we called?  
Why didn’t you act sooner Lord?  
Why did Lazarus have to die?  
Why Lord Why?

Often we don’t have an answer to the why questions, but for once we have a clue about God’s purpose when Jesus says at the beginning of the passage: “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it” God allows the suffering of Martha and Mary for a time, so that God’s glory can be fully seen in Jesus actions.

Lazarus is in the tomb, with a stone across the door. Martha, ever practical, points out that he will stink by now four days after death. Jesus insists, the stone is moved and Jesus prays out loud that God will hear him.

Jesus shouts and calls Lazarus, a word of command,  
**Lazarus come on out.**

And out he comes, shuffling In his bandages, blinking into the sunlight Jesus calls on the mourners to free Lazarus from the wrappings and bindings of death.

**Nothing is too dead for God to restore life**  
Nobody is too dead for God to breath new life in  
Jesus continues to call people out of the tombs of their dead lives, their failed hopes and expectations, their spiritual suffocation in materialism and comfort.  
And we are called to help us unwrap each other from the clinging bandages of bad choices, wrong turnings and wrong priorities,  
**God commands us to unbind, release, renew, help set each other free.**

And many of the Jews believe.

End of the story?  
End of the reading certainly, a nice positive upbeat ending.

BUT  
read on

<sup>45</sup> Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. <sup>46</sup> **But** some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. <sup>47</sup> Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”

Many don't believe, many are threatened by Jesus power to give life. Jesus is stirring up trouble with the Romans threatening the delicate political

status quo. The Jewish authorities feel if they don't act to stop Jesus, the Romans would crush the whole nation.

This is the point at which they decide to kill Jesus, and Lazarus too

Jesus is just too disruptive, too dangerous and Lazarus is proof positive of Jesus power.

God is in the business of giving new life, second chances, God's action is disruptive and dangerous to the status quo.

**Nothing is too dead for God to restore life, no one is beyond reach of his life giving healing and restoring power.**

Jesus says to Each of YOU,

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

**Do you believe this?”**