

The King Still Has One More Move

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, Easter Sunday, 16 April 2006

Do you like to think about death? As a rule, we don't much. And we certainly don't think much about what happens after death. But that hasn't always been the case. For many generations, when parents would tuck their children in at night, they would have them say a little prayer. Some of you probably know this prayer:

*Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

That's kind of a cheery way to send kids off to bed, isn't it? There's actually a second verse:

*Our days begin with trouble here, our life is but a span.
And cruel death is always near, so frail a thing is man.*

Good night, honey – sweet dreams. People used to teach their kids to pray this, because they wanted their children to know that death is real, but it doesn't have to be the end.

Now there's another way to think about death. Anyone recognize the name Mel Blanc? He was the voice behind all of the cartoon characters in the *Looney Tunes*. At the end of every movie, you would see Porky Pig come on the screen, and he would always say the same thing: "That's all folks!" A couple of years ago, Mel Blanc died. Do you know what his family put on his tombstone? "That's all folks." The question we have to answer on Easter Sunday is this: Which is true? "He is risen indeed," or "That's all folks?" Does death mean that the show is over, or is it possible that somewhere the real show is just starting?

A resurrection story

I want to look at this question for a few moments by walking through a story in the Bible – a story about death and life. If you want to follow me it's in John chapter 11 (page 1041 in the church Bible). This story involves Jesus and a good friend of his named Lazarus. Lazarus lived with his sisters, Mary and Martha, in Bethany, kind of a suburb of Jerusalem. When Jesus went to Jerusalem, he would generally stay with Mary and Martha and Lazarus. But at the time of this story, they haven't seen Jesus for a while because the last time he was there, some religious leaders tried to stone Him. He's been keeping his distance.

But then one day, Lazarus gets sick. He has a fever, coughs up some blood, or finds a lump, and goes to get whatever kind of medical help was available in those days. But the doctors just shake their heads and say, "Sorry. There's nothing we can do." So his sisters, Mary and Martha, are desperate. They have only one hope. They send word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick" (John 11:3). They know Jesus can heal. They've seen him do it before. He's done it for complete strangers. And Lazarus is such a good friend of Jesus that the sisters don't even have to mention his name. They just say, "the one you love." Surely Jesus will heal him. But then Jesus does a strange thing. The text says, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days" (John 11:5-6). Now generally, if there is someone you love, and something goes wrong, and they tell you they need you, what do you say? You say, "I'll be right there" You drop everything. But Jesus waits two days. Why? We'll come back to that. For now, Jesus waits two days. Finally, he says to His disciples, "Let's go back to Judea," which is where Jerusalem and Bethany were located (John 11:7). His disciples remind him that the last time Jesus was in Jerusalem, the religious leaders tried to kill Him. Jerusalem is no longer a safe place for him to be. But Jesus says, "Lazarus needs me. I'm going."

By the time they get to Bethany, though, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Mary and Martha are surrounded by family and friends, and they're in deep mourning. Martha goes out to meet Jesus and says, "Lord, if only you had been here my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). That's a very poignant statement. Everybody in this room has some "If Onlys":

*If only I hadn't said those words.
If only I had made a wiser choice.
If only I'd gone to the doctor sooner.
If only I'd told them I love them.
If only I'd said, "Please forgive me."
If only I'd said, "I forgive you."*

Everybody in here has some If Onlys. And sometimes it feels like our If Onlys are the end of the story. But they're not. There is Someone we can bring them to. Martha brings her If Only to Jesus. "If only you had been here."

Christ's unique claims

Jesus says to her, "Martha, your brother will rise again." And Martha responds, "I know. I know about our hope in the resurrection at the end of time." But then Jesus makes this statement. This is one of the most remarkable statements in the entire Bible. Jesus says to her, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11: 25-26)

I want to pause for a moment here, because on Easter we can sometimes skim over statements like that. But consider what a staggering claim Jesus is making. Imagine for a moment that you have a relative – someone that you love – who gets sick and you ask me to come and pray. But I don't make it until your loved one dies. You're upset and you say, "I wish that you had come and prayed. Maybe God would have heard and healed them." Imagine, then, that I say, "Fear not. Don't be afraid. I am the Resurrection and the Life ... Whoever believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" What would you do? You would call the men in little white coats to come and take me away, because no human being in his or her right mind would say that. No religious leader – Mohammed, Buddha, L. Ron Hubbard – ever said that. But Jesus said it, and he asked Martha what he asks people still: "Do you believe this?" Martha says, "Yes Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:27).

Now could you say that? How would you answer Jesus' question? Maybe you are not sure. Maybe you've never really explored who Jesus is. Come to the *Tough Questions* series starting Sunday week. Come to the *Alpha* dinner on 10 May. There's a whole eternity riding on who Jesus is, and it's worth researching.

Christ's unique compassion

Jesus finds Martha's sister, Mary, and the other mourners. They are in deep sorrow. The text says that "when Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (John 11:33). Now the word "weeping" is a little bit misleading. It sounds like something people in our culture often do, a kind of polite, quiet sniffing. But in Jerusalem, even today, there is a wall where people go to lament and cry out to God. Do you know what it's called? The Wailing Wall. The word for "weep" here means "loud wailing." When Jesus sees and hears their anguish, their wailing, he is moved to tears. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Shortest verse in the Bible. Jesus weiled. Why? Jesus knew that Lazarus was going to be OK. He knew how the story was going to turn out. So why does grief come pouring out of Him like this? This is a very important part of the story: it is a window on the greatness of God's love. When I was a little kid, one of my older teenage brothers got into a fair bit of trouble. He was confused and angry, into drugs and parties. I remember one night he had an argument with mum and dad, swore at dad, slammed the front door in his face, and took off. It was late at night, and I was in bed just lying there, listening to it all unfold. And then I heard something I'd never heard before. I heard my dad weeping. Weeping for my brother. And I knew then how much dad loved us boys.

Jesus weeps for these people. He loves them. A couple of days later, Jesus will stand outside Jerusalem, and he will weep again. He will look at the city and think of all the people who live, people who are confused or hurting, worried or angry, selfish or sad, or just plain busy and racing through their lives, headed for their graves and for eternity without ever saying "Yes" to the God who would die to embrace them. And he'll think how much He loves them and longs to embrace them, and how they won't let Him. And he'll weep. He weeps for you. He weeps for me.

Christ's unique credentials

But then Jesus stops, and he stands at the face of this tomb – a cave with a stone laid across the entrance, a cave just like the one in which his own body would be laid in a few days time – and he says: "Remove the stone." Martha says to him, "But Lord, by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days" (John 11:39). If you know much about Martha from the Bible, you know that she was a very meticulous hostess, a very proper woman. Her last name might have been "Stewart." She knows that as soon as they break the seal and remove the stone, it is going to be very unpleasant for everybody. So she says, "Jesus, he has been there four days." This detail is there for a reason. There was a common Jewish folk belief that the soul of a deceased person would hang around the body for three days, hoping to get back in. But after four days, decomposition would have advanced enough that there would be no hope of reentry. Then the soul would leave. The point that John wants to make is that Lazarus is really dead. There is no doubt about this. He's been in the grave four days. But Jesus is not concerned. He says: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (John 11: 40-41). So they take the stone away.

Now imagine the drama of this moment. All of the wailing stops. Everybody stands still. The stone is rolled away. Then Jesus says, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me" (John 11:41) Now, Lazarus has not come out of the tomb yet. Nothing has moved inside. How does Jesus know he's not dead? There's no odour. There's no smell of death. His body is whole. And Jesus says to his Father, "I thank You that You have heard me." When was He

praying? Remember those two days before He came? He wasn't doing nothing. He was doing what matters most. He was praying, "God, defeat the power of death in Lazarus' life." And then he says, "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43) And Lazarus does. Can you imagine that moment? Can you imagine the astonishment, and the party that followed? But, interestingly enough, John doesn't describe it. We don't find out about that in this story. Because this is not the ultimate resurrection story. Lazarus was still mortal. In fact, ironically, the last time that we hear of him is in the next chapter. John 12:10 says, "The religious leaders made plans to kill Lazarus for on account of him many of the people were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him" (John 12:10-11). Imagine Lazarus saying, "Man, I already died once. Now I have to go through it all over again! I'll have to call NZI to see if my life insurance policy covers a second death."

The ultimate resurrection story

This is not the ultimate resurrection story. But it points to the ultimate Resurrection Story. The Easter story. When Jesus came out of the tomb, he defeated death. That means that when death comes for someone who puts their trust in Jesus – for somebody who follows Him – that's not all folks. For his followers, the grave is not the end. Tom Tewell wrote about a florist who had mixed up two orders on a busy day: A new business was opening, and a family had a death. Both of them had ordered flowers, but the bouquets got mixed up. The guy with the new business came in and complained: "The flowers that were delivered to my business on my opening day said, 'Rest in peace.'" The florist said, "You think you have problems. You should have seen the people who just left here. They had a funeral, and they got a bouquet that said, 'Good luck in your new location.'" Anne Lamott wrote: "For the Christian, death is just a change of address." A new location. A much better location.

Do you have that hope? Jesus is still asking people, "Will you trust Me? Will you trust Me?" You can do that today, if you never have. You can tell Him, "I want to confess my selfishness and sin and receive your forgiveness. I want to devote what's left of my life to following you, and then I want to spend eternity with you on the other side of the grave." And then, no matter what you face, even death, you're not on your own anymore.

Checkmate?

Ken Ulmer tells a story about two men who were in an art museum and came upon a painting of a chess game. One character looked like a man; the other character looked a lot like the Devil. The man is down to his last piece on the chessboard. The title of the painting is "Checkmate." One of the two men looking at this painting was an international chess champion, and something about the painting intrigued him. He began to study it. He became so engrossed that the man with him grew impatient and asked him what he was doing. He said, "There's something about this painting that bothers me, and I want to study it for a little while. You go ahead and wander around." He studied it. His head started nodding, and his hands started moving. When his friend came back, he said, "We have to locate the man who painted this picture and tell him that either he has to change the picture, or he has to change the title." His friend asked, "Why? What's wrong with the painting?" The man said, "Well, it's titled 'Checkmate,' but the title is wrong. The painter's either got to change the painting or change the title, because the King still has one more move."

Going down to Judea to see Lazarus would cost Jesus his life, as he knew it would. And on Good Friday, they tried him and judged him; they whipped him and beat him; they mocked him and scorned him; they hung him on a cross to die and laid him low in a tomb to rot the way every human body has rotted ever since death entered this sorry, dark world. And then they said to everybody, "That's all, folks." Show's over. Time to go home. Checkmate. But they were wrong, because ... the King still had one more move!

I don't know what challenge you face today. Maybe there is stress at work. Maybe you're in a relationship that is falling apart, or your marriage already fallen apart. Maybe there's a son or daughter, somebody that you love, who is struggling or estranged from you. Maybe you have financial pressures. Maybe you have done the wrong thing, or said the wrong thing, or made a mistake that feels so big it could never be redeemed. Maybe not. Maybe things are going pretty well, and there is no crisis at all. But there will be one day. The mortality rate is still hovering right around 100%. Whatever you face, whether it's today or tomorrow, the promise of Jesus to everyone who puts their trust in him is this: There is hope. Even when it feels like "checkmate," that's not all folks, because ... the King still has one more move.

Acknowledgement

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