**John 11:1-44 “The Resurrection and the Life”**  
“I Am” – Sermon 19

Prop: Trust in the love and power of Christ the Resurrection, precisely when you are allowed to suffer.

Intro: Has anyone else found themselves thinking about death recently? I mean, I know some people consider it morbid, but let’s face it, it happens. Years ago, I was afraid to tell my wife I sometimes thought about what I would ever do if she were to die, until I found out that she had just as detailed a plan about what she would do if I died. Some people would say, that’s morbid—no, that’s realistic. Our friend Nancy died scarcely more than a week ago; we just had her funeral on Wednesday. That following Phil Manifold’s funeral on Tuesday. I will do my grandpa’s funeral in Kentucky on Saturday. Death is something we have to face; it does no good to hide it in a closet or within the walls of a funeral home.

I think most of the reason we try not to think about it is that we’re afraid it will rob us of our happiness in the present. That’s true about suffering generally. We figure the best way to be happy is not to think about suffering, and certainly if we want to be happy in our relationship with God, we don’t like to think that God has a hand in our suffering. If that’s the case, Jesus’ behavior in this chapter will probably surprise us; it certainly surprised those who were around him. But we find here that Christ has a purpose not only in our suffering but even in our death. And we might not understand it at the time or at any time in this life, but if we are willing to trust him, trust in the love and power of Christ, who is the Resurrection and the Life, we will discover that his purpose for us is bigger even than death.

This story is not only a rich treasure trove of divine truth, it’s one of the most beautifully told stories in the Bible, which bears the marks of someone who was there and experienced it firsthand with all the emotion and humanity that an eye witness can bring. We’re going to move through the story as John tells it from his own memory, and as we go along we’re going to make four points.

1. [vv 1-15] Christ has a purpose in suffering.
   1. The way Jesus speaks is confusing for us who view things in a human way with human priorities. In the first place, he says, “This sickness will not end in death.” And we say, Jesus, your optimism failed you. Thanks for the power of positive thinking and everything, but you were wrong. This sickness did end in death. Didn’t Jesus know this would happen? Of course he did. He stayed two more days for that very purpose. He was able to tell his disciples without any further news update, “Lazarus is dead.” He knew from the beginning that Lazarus would die. How can he say, “This sickness will not lead to death”?
      1. Jesus can see further than that. Alissa’s sister came back from Japan for Christmas. She flew out of Tokyo into Detroit. But she wouldn’t have said she was going to Detroit or to Tokyo; it’s a matter of little significance that those were necessary stops. She wasn’t taking a trip to Detroit but to her parents’ home in Midland. The world looks at death as a stopping point, the final destination. Jesus says, No, that’s not Lazarus’s destination nor the destination for this illness. Just because we have a layover in death for a bit doesn’t make it the destination. So what is?
      2. “It is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Death will not have the final say, God will, so that the Son of God may be glorified. The first purpose God has for this sickness, is so that he and his Son might be glorified. We’ll see more than once that Jesus has no higher priority than to glorify his Father. Our weakness, our material poverty, our worldly loss are no less an opportunity for God to be glorified than our material comfort, because in our weakness we see most clearly that he is strong.
   2. But it’s not that he benefits from our loss. The second purpose Jesus makes clear for allowing this illness is love for those who suffer.
      1. This is where your translation might get in the way. Look at vv 5-6 again. “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” That part should be pretty clear in all our translations; this family, these two sisters and their brother, are his friends and he loves them. But now what’s the next word you have at the beginning of v 6? If you have the NIV or NLT, it says something like, “Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.” As in, he loves them, BUT he didn’t come heal Lazarus. I’m sorry to say that is not an accurate translation. I like the NIV, but this is a good example of why it’s helpful to familiarize yourself with more than one translation. If you’re used to just one, try reading a different one sometimes, because it might pick up what the other misses. If you have the King James or the English Standard or the Holman, it will say something like this: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. SO when he heard that he was sick, he stayed two more days.” He loved them. THEREFORE he did not come and heal Lazarus.
      2. How in the world does this make sense? He let Lazarus die, BECAUSE he loved him? That’s what it says. We rarely think that the suffering we endure, much less death, is actually an expression of Jesus’ love for us. But for Lazarus it was exactly that. There was something he wanted to do for Lazarus that he couldn’t do if he didn’t let him die. And if that’s how Jesus treats his close friend whom he loves, we can expect that he will express his love for us in a similar way. What that goal is we’ll see as we go, but it has to do with what we just observed, that neither suffering nor death is the destination; they’re just a layover on the way.
   3. Jesus’ third purpose for this suffering is the faith of those who witness it. Jesus tells his disciples, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.”
      1. And again, there is this strange statement: “I am glad I was not there.” It was intentional that Jesus let his friend die. It was for God’s glory, mysteriously it was out of love for Lazarus himself, and it’s also for the sake of his disciples so that they may believe in him. Jesus is going to do something through this suffering so that the faith of his disciples will be strengthened.
      2. This is Jesus’ purpose. It’s valuable to go over this before we get there, because as in our own situations, once we enter into suffering, it’s not easy to see his purposes clearly from the inside.
2. [16-27] Faith comes before understanding.
   1. The first person we encounter who exhibits this faith is Thomas. If I had to grade Thomas, I would give him about an A-. Not a lot of points for assurance that Jesus can handle this situation and that he is powerful to overcome his opponents, but A+ on his faith that Jesus is worth dying for. He is willing to die with Christ.
      1. When Jesus says to his disciples, let’s go back to Judea, you can imagine the glances they gave each other. “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you [twice], and yet you are going back there?” In some ways Thomas is right. Next week we’ll begin moving toward Jesus’ own death; we’ll be counting down to the Passover Feast, and he will be killed.
      2. And Thomas doesn’t understand the plan that Jesus is living by, much less the plan that Jesus has for him. But wherever Jesus leads him, Thomas will follow, even if it’s to his death. If we approach suffering with the attitude that priority one is to avoid it, and priority two is to figure out where Jesus wants to lead us, we may have already missed our calling. As it turned out, it was not Jesus’ plan for Thomas to die on this trip. Very often we face difficult and painful circumstances and we pray for deliverance and God delivers us; he heals us, takes away our suffering, and he delights to do so in love. But that’s for him to decide, not us. We don’t make our comfort and security the prerequisite for faithfulness. Like Thomas, first we follow, then we find out if we’ll live through it.
   2. When Jesus arrives at Bethany, before they even reach the town, Martha hears about it and goes to meet him. She also doesn’t understand: she doesn’t ask why, she doesn’t attack him, but hear her confusion when she says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She knows he has that power; she believes in him. So she doesn’t understand why he didn’t come. Far be it from me, she might say, to question him whom I acknowledge as my Lord; but my brother is dead, and this really hurts. She doesn’t understand and yet she believes: “I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”
      1. This is our starting place in suffering. We trust first, even though we often won’t understand. And Jesus could have explained it to her; he could have just told her, Martha, I’m going to the tomb to raise him to life right now. But he doesn’t explain. He doesn’t give her knowledge of the future, just as he rarely gives it to us.
      2. Instead he helps her to know him better. Again he makes one of his bold I AM statements that he’s been making throughout John: “I Am the Bread of Life; I Am the Door; I Am the Good Shepherd.” When Jesus tells Martha her brother will rise again, she answers, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” This is a great testimony of faith. The resurrection is coming. But Martha is thinking of the resurrection only as an event that is far away. Jesus takes this thinking and radically changes it; the resurrection is more than an event. The resurrection is a person. I Am the Resurrection. The resurrection is not this distant idea you can’t reach. That day she is looking forward to when the dead will be raised to life again, it will be the life of Christ that raises them, because he has come again; and standing there with Martha as she is grieving for her brother, he can tell her that resurrection she longs for is standing right in front of her.
      3. There is a day coming when all suffering and pain and death will be overcome forever for the one who follows Christ. That resurrection is coming. But Jesus is that resurrection and he is with us even when we’re facing death. Before the final victory comes, he is revealing his glory to us, he is giving us the grace to know him, to deepen our trust in his power and his love for us, not only after the suffering is over but in the suffering.
3. [28-37] Christ is compassionate in our suffering.
   1. Let me suggest to you that we see Jesus’ compassion for Lazarus and his sisters expressed at two different levels here. First of all, obviously, Jesus feels the grief of his friends. There are some commentators who suggest Jesus couldn’t really have been upset that his friend was dead; he was on his way to raise him to life right then! But that fails to understand the true humanity of Jesus. Jesus is God right? Correct. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” But “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” He became truly human.
      1. Lazarus was his friend. Jesus had friends, that he talked with and laughed with and shared meals with, just like you do with your friends. You can feel in the telling of the story that John who tells it was one of those friends and so was Lazarus; this is a very personal story for all of them. Jesus cares for his friends, and now his friend Lazarus has died. When he sees Mary and those with her weeping, it says “he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” Sometimes this is translated, “He groaned in his spirit.” Remember now that it was Jesus’ choice to allow Lazarus to die; he stayed away precisely for that purpose. But as he sees the grief of his friends, his emotions, just as human as yours and mine, welled up within him. And at that moment when they invite him to follow them to the tomb of his friend, that emotion bursts forth in tears.
      2. I am glad that my Lord has a heart that aches with grief for the same things that grieve us. Jesus has a plan and a purpose for this suffering; he can see to the other side of it in a way that we can’t. That’s true for Lazarus and that’s true for us in our suffering. He is working in all things, including our pain, for the good of those who love him. But he is not indifferent to our present pain just because it is in pursuit of future glory. When our loved one dies, when we get that diagnosis we were afraid of, when we are suffering, he doesn’t say, “Oh well, never mind; it will all work out in a few decades.” He grieves with his people. He has compassion on them in their present pain.
   2. So how could he let Lazarus die? When Jesus wept, the people said, “See how he loved him!” And so they can’t understand why he didn’t save him. They can’t understand, just as we often fail to understand, how someone who loves us so much and has the power to stop our suffering allows us to suffer. It never enters their minds the possibility that he allowed Lazarus to die BECAUSE he loved Lazarus and Martha and Mary. Jesus has a deeper compassion, which brought him to earth in the first place. Jesus is grieved by not merely this one death but the reality of death itself, the “tyranny of death” over the human race brought about by our sin that keeps the world in darkness.
      1. In the death of his friend Lazarus, Jesus would have been reminded that the whole human race is in slavery to sin, resulting in death, and that the only way to freedom is not to postpone death or go around it but to pass through it. This compassion would very soon lead him to his own death, because without his sacrificial death on the cross in payment for our sins, we couldn’t be free from sin, we couldn’t know God, or receive the eternal joy he wanted to give us. It was only through death that he could bring us life.
      2. And it’s not merely something we stand back and watch Jesus do; we gain life by participating with him in his death. Week 1 of our Bible reading plan as a church: Who read Philippians 3 this week? “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” We don’t earn our salvation, by suffering or good works or any means; but we gain salvation by knowing Christ, by being united with Christ through faith. For Lazarus, it was more important and better that he should experience the resurrection power of Jesus than to avoid death for a while. It was more important for his friends to see and believe in Jesus power over death than to be spared the grief of death in the first place. And very often the way that we come to know Jesus more and trust in him more and enjoy richer fellowship with him is by dying to the world through suffering. He doesn’t call us to go anywhere he himself wasn’t willing to go. But out of love, out of compassion for our spiritual weakness, he allows us to face suffering and death so that he can teach us to find life in him on the other side.
4. [38-44] Victory always follows faith, even if not as soon as we would like.
   1. Before the victory, there comes this moment of crisis where death must be faced. It’s all well to say that you believe in Jesus, as Martha did, to say you believe he is the Resurrection and the Life, but then there is this moment where they arrive at the tomb and Jesus says to take away the stone. Inside that tomb is death, and Martha is afraid to face it. If you open the tomb and Jesus is not who he says, death wins and it mocks her with its stench. But if death is not faced, they will never see Jesus’ victory over it. We face this crisis all the time.
      1. We have crises where we have to face Death to ourselves. We have to make a choice between seeking our own comfort and going where Christ calls us. Maybe it’s giving money or time or love for a difficult person that we don’t feel like we can afford to give. It costs us something else we wanted to do, or it causes us personal pain. Or something just goes wrong and we have to learn to thank God in the midst of suffering. We have to take the chance of facing death to ourselves before we can experience victory.
      2. At some point we all have to face our Spiritual death. All of us are dead in our sins until we repent and trust in Jesus for our forgiveness. You need salvation, and Jesus died for this. Please don’t put it off. If you haven’t faced the fact that you are spiritually dead in your sins, you need to face it now and find salvation, or you will never receive life.
      3. Eventually all of us who die before the return of Christ will have to face Physical death. We’d probably rather just not think about it, but it’s coming and we’re going to have to deal with it sooner or later. When you reach the last days of your life, how do you want to die? Will it be in fear and regret? Or with confidence in Jesus’ power? “When life sinks apace and death is in view, this word of his grace will comfort us through; no fearing or doubting, with Christ on our side, we hope to die shouting, ‘The Lord will provide.’”
   2. We would rather not face death or suffering. But they come anyway, and we run up to Jesus saying, “Lord, if you had been there, I wouldn’t have suffered like this.” But for those who belong to him, even suffering and death are an expression of his love for us, so that we will draw nearer to him, know him more profoundly, see his love and power more vividly. Because when our faith is in Christ, when we draw near to him through suffering, victory always comes. No matter what we’re in the midst of now, in whatever way we’re facing death, the day will come when Jesus will call us out of our graves, take the grave clothes off of us and set us free, to his eternal glory and our eternal joy in him.