John 11:17-44 *Easter Sunday: The Grave Robber*

***Death is a Thief***I found a website that tracks violence in the city of Chicago. So far this year—as of Friday, anyway—there have been 93 people shot and killed in Chicago. 426 have been shot and wounded. There has been a total of 113 homicides in the Chicagoland area. In Chicago, a person is murdered, on average, every 18 hours and 41 minutes.

There is a spirit of violence and fear in our world. In some cities you cannot even honk your horn carelessly for the fear that someone might just fire a pistol through your windshield. That’s our world.

According to the World Health Organization, there were 56.4 million deaths worldwide in 2015, the most recent year for which comprehensive statistics are available. The leading killers were heart disease and stroke, causing 8.7 million and 6.2 million deaths respectively. Both Diabetes and Dementia claimed about 1.5 million lives apiece. Diseases that we don’t think of as killers here in the U.S. still claim a lot of lives worldwide. Diarrheal diseases accounted for 1.4 million deaths and Tuberculosis killed 1.3 million. Worldwide, approximately a quarter million women die in child birth each year.

This year, the average life expectancy for men, worldwide, is 71.5 years. Which means, if I’m average, I have about 25 years left to live.

Death is a thief.

We were made to live. We want to live forever. But death comes in and snatches life away from us. We cannot save ourselves from death. No security system or healthcare plan or exercise regimen can prevent death from eventually sneaking in and taking life away from us. No scientist in the world can stop death.

Death is a thief. But the good news of Easter is that Jesus has come to steal life back from death. Jesus is the Grave Robber.

I wasn’t a huge fan of the band U2 growing up, but I did own a copy of their live album: *Rattle and Hum.* And this week one of the songs on that album came back to me. Not the song, so much, as the introduction to it. The song was a cover of *Helter Skelter.* And on the album, as the song begins, Bono says with his Irish brogue: “Charles Manson stole this song from the Beatles. We’re stealing it back!”

That’s what I thought about this week as I looked at the story of Jesus and Lazarus. **Death stole life from Lazarus, then Jesus stole it back!**

For the last 7 weeks or so, we’ve been looking at the 7 miracles that John chooses to highlight in his biography of Jesus. He’s not saying that these are the only miracles Jesus performed, but he structures his gospel around seven miracles that teach us lessons about Jesus’ identity and mission. He calls them signs. And the seventh sign, the one that prepares the ground for the greatest miracle--Jesus’ resurrection, is the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

***The Big Claim***

The story is told in John chapter 11, and we’ll pick it up in **verse 17:**

 17On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

18Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.

Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha. They are all close friends of Jesus. In the verses at the beginning of the chapter, Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick. But rather than leave immediately, Jesus chooses to wait two more days. When His disciples wonder why He isn’t moving more quickly, Jesus says something mysterious about how Lazarus’s illness is going to result in God’s glory.

Jesus must have been at least a day’s journey from Mary and Martha’s home town of Bethany, because by the time He gets there, Lazarus has already been dead four days. That’s one day for the messenger to get to Jesus, two days that Jesus delayed, and another day for travel. It is unlikely that, even if Jesus left immediately upon receiving the message, He could have gotten there before Lazarus died.

The thief death has robbed Lazarus of life, and there isn’t much anybody could have done about it. **Verse 20**:

20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.  21"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

There’s something a little passive-aggressive about what Martha says to Jesus. She’s not really blaming Jesus, but she kind of is. There was no way He could have gotten there before Lazarus died, but if He would have she’s sure He would still be alive, if only Jesus had been closer…

Even more than that, Jesus has already done some amazing things in the gospel of John. He’s healed a Roman Soldier’s son from 20 miles away. He’s manipulated the elements to turn water into wine and multiply fish and loaves. He’s walked on water. Do you mean to tell me, Martha seems to be implying, that Jesus could not have found some way to heal Lazarus?

It would appear, though, that Jesus had something a little more impressive in mind. He could have walked on water and appeared in the nick of time. He could have sent a healing command over the hills and valleys to fix Lazarus up even as he was drawing his final breath. But Jesus has already demonstrated His healing power. It’s time now to unveil His resurrection power. **Verse 23:**

 23Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

 24Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

 25Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Here is one of the most important claims that Jesus makes in all of the Bible. The truth or falsehood of this claim makes or breaks Christianity.

Jesus says: “I am the resurrection and the life.” This sets Jesus apart from all other religious leaders and all other belief systems. Christianity is not built on a foundation of philosophy or a code of ethics. The core conviction of our faith is that Jesus—the incarnation of God—defeated death. After the miracle of resurrection He performs for Lazarus, Jesus is going to walk out of His own tomb under His own power.

If that’s true, then you have to pay attention to Jesus.

If it’s not true, then Christianity falls apart.

Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus is the answer to our greatest problem. Jesus is the grave robber who steals life back from the thief, death.

To Martha’s credit, she believes Jesus. **Verse 27:**

 27"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

28And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." 29When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

 32When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Mary says exactly the same thing that her sister said, but you get the impression they said it in different ways. While Martha wanted an explanation from Jesus, it appears that what Mary most needs is a hug. **Verse 33:**

 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 34"Where have you laid him?" he asked.   
      "Come and see, Lord," they replied.

 35Jesus wept.

Verse 35 is the shortest verse in the English Bible, and one that a lot of us memorized real early on. And yet it says a ton about the kind of person Jesus is. **Verse 36:**

 36Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

 37But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

For some of those watching, Jesus’ tears are proof of His deep affection for this family. But for the skeptics, it’s just another reason to wonder why Jesus didn’t get there sooner and heal His friend. You can hear them muttering: “Maybe His powers are strong enough to work parlor tricks with a blind man, but He can’t do much about death.”

***Lazarus, Come Out***

**Verse 38:**

 38Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39"Take away the stone," he said.   
      "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

I like the King James translation of verse 39. It says: “Lord, by this time he stinketh.” Without embalming fluid, and in the hot climate of the Middle East, a body that has been dead for 4 days is NOT going to smell good. There’s a reason the custom was to bury a body within a day of death.

But it is significant that Lazarus has been dead for four days. The prevalent superstition back then was that the soul of a person hovers over a body for the first three days after death, hoping for a chance to get back in. But by the fourth day, once decomposition begins, it gives up and departs. So by popular belief, Lazarus was good and totally dead. **Verse 40:**

 40Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

 41So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

It’s unusual for Jesus to pray with an over-the-shoulder audience in mind, but it’s clear that He wants everybody to understand that what they are about to see is for the glory of God--that Jesus really is the One sent down from Heaven. **Verse 43:**

 43When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

We know how this is going to end, of course; but what if we didn’t? What if we were there that day, and we heard Jesus talking to a dead man as if he could hear Him? Mark Batterson writes:

Because we assume the outcome—Lazarus walking out of the tomb—we fail to appreciate the risk Jesus took. If Lazarus remains dead, this ranks as Jesus’ most embarrassing moment and the family and friends who had gathered to grieve are the victims of a cruel joke!

Don’t miss this little subplot in this story line.

The six miracles that precede this one certainly establish Jesus’ credibility. He reveals His mastery over everything from water molecules to the four dimensions of space-time reality. But just like the world of athletics or entertainment, you’re only as good as your last game or last performance. If Lazarus doesn’t walk out of the tomb, Jesus’ credibility is out the window. So when Jesus called Lazarus out, He was pushing all of His miraculous chips to the middle of the table and betting it all on Lazarus. The stakes could not have been any higher… (*The Grave Robber,* 256)

We need to imagine a moment of high tension. Imagine everyone staring at the empty opening to the tomb, wondering what they are going to see. Imagine how foolish most of them must have felt, because everyone knows that dead men don’t walk out of their graves.

Then, **verse 44**:

44The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.   
      Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

John’s description of that moment is extremely understated. Jesus speaks, the dead man walks out, and Jesus suggests that they might want to unbind him.

But you can imagine the drama of it all: women fainting, children screaming in terror, the sisters shouting for joy, the recently revived Lazarus trying to walk with his hands and feet bound and a burial shroud covering his eyes…and in the middle of it all, Jesus, the divine intersection of heaven and earth, the one who steals life back from death.

***Jesus Wept***

So, that’s the story of Lazarus. It’s a long enough story that just telling it doesn’t leave much time for talking about it, but allow me to make two observations from this story:

First, **death stinks.** Death stinks.

I don’t mean just because dead bodies decay and start to smell. I mean that death is an unnatural, unwelcome part of our world. I mean that the prospect of death is scary and that when death occurs to those close to us it is the source of our greatest grief and pain.

I mean death stinks. That it is something we would rather not deal with. That it is our greatest and most pernicious enemy.

And I believe Jesus feels the same way. I believe Jesus thinks that death stinks also. And I say that because of what happened when Jesus stood with Mary outside of Lazarus’ tomb. I say that because of the shortest verse in the Bible. **John 11:35**

Jesus wept.

Let me ask you a question: why would Jesus weep? Sure, everybody around Him was carrying on with weeping and wailing. One of His best friends was standing before Him broken and filled with sorrow. Another of His best friends was dead in a grave. The whole production was set up for tears.

But consider what Jesus already knew: He knew that He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. He knew that already when the messenger first arrived to tell Him that Lazarus was sick and He said “This illness will not end in death”. He knew it two days later when He told his disciples it was time to and wake Lazarus from his sleep. He knew it when He talked to Martha and told her "Your brother will rise again."

So what was going on? If Jesus knew He was about to call Lazarus out of the grave, why did He weep?

I think John gives us a clue. In **verse 33** he writes that:

When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

That expression, "deeply moved in spirit" comes from the Greek word embrimaomai, which comes from the sound that a horse makes when it’s angry. It’s almost a snort of indignation.  It is a release of air from the body in such a way that expresses extreme outrage and emotion.

Jesus was angry. Angry, not at Mary and the others for crying, but angry that they needed to cry at all. Jesus was rip-snorting mad about death.

That's why he burst into tears in v.35.  Jesus hates death.  He's sees it and He is deeply moved in His spirit.  He hates how it leads to grief and a sense of loss.  He hates how it rips apart families.  It makes him cry and shake to see death.

You see: if Jesus was the Son of God as the Bible says He was (and is) then He knew all about the creation of humanity—He was there. He knows that the intention is for us to live, not die. He knows that death only exists because of sin—Adam and Eve and the serpent, and all the consequences of that—so He is truly bothered by death.

Death stinks. It is a thief. It is a part of our existence that does not belong. We were made for life. Death is only here because of sin. And so it is an enemy that must be defeated.

As Jesus stood in the midst of that funeral He knew that His friend Lazarus was going to live again, but He also knew that death is an aberration in God's good creation and He was outraged by it. And so He joined them in their weeping, expressing both His anger and grief that death exists at all.

Death stinks. You and I, we were made to live. This world is still fallen, death is something we are still going to have to experience, we’ll still know the pain and loss of losing loved ones. But don’t let anyone tell you that death is natural, or good. Never let anybody tell you that death is a friend. It isn’t. Death is a real, relentless, pain-inflicting-on-all-who-come-in-contact-with-it enemy. Death stinks.

***The Resurrection and the Life***

But now, a second observation from this story, and the good news: Jesus is the victor over the enemy death. Death may stink, but **Jesus is bigger than death.**

That’s the focal point of this story. When Jesus comes to Martha and identifies Himself as the **"resurrection and the life"** He is saying that He is the key to relaxing the tension created by death. He tells her: "He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

The reason Jesus came to earth was to defeat the enemy of death, to overcome its power upon us. He is saying that, by believing in Him, there is life after death. "Though he die, yet shall he live." But more than that, He is saying that within Him there is also the power to overcome death, to remove its sting, to relax the tension in the assurance that death will not have the final say. "Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

And then, just so it would be clear that He was not merely talking, Jesus went to Lazarus' tomb and uttered those simple words, "Lazarus, come out." He demonstrated, in a concrete and tangible way that He is the solution to death.

You know, it is interesting that if you read through all the stories of Jesus you will never find Him preaching a funeral sermon. Every funeral He ever attended in scripture, He broke up by raising the deceased back to life. There's Lazarus in this story. There's the daughter of a man named Jairus, a 12 year old girl that had died and Jesus took her hand and raised her back to life. And there's the son of a widow woman in a town called Nain, where Jesus just happened to be passing by as the funeral procession went through and He raised the boy back to life. Even His own funeral was ended by His resurrection. Death cannot compete with the life that is found in Jesus.

It's not that He abolished physical death. Each of these people He raised eventually died again. Unless Jesus returns in our lifetimes, each of us will still die as well.

The miracles in John are called “signs.” I believe they are signs of the way the world is supposed to be.

You see Jesus stands between two worlds. On the one hand, H

e is a flesh and blood human being living in a world broken and made dysfunctional by sin. It’s a world with hunger and sickness and blindness and death. But, on the other hand, Jesus is the Son of God who brings the kingdom of heaven to earth. He is a representative of the way things are meant to be, the way things will be again some day.

And so, the miracles represent an in-breaking of that perfect, heavenly world into our world of sin and sorrow. They are signs of the way the world is supposed to be. When Jesus stood in front of Lazarus’ tomb and called Him back to life, He was giving us a tangible preview of the way things will someday be for all of us. He was showing that for those who believe in Him death will not have the final say. That we, who have been created to live, if we believe in Him, will continue to live even though we die.

It wasn’t a miracle so much—a suspension of natural law—as it was a restoration to the way things are really supposed to be.

Jesus is bigger than death. Death does not have to get the final say. If we recognize Jesus, as Martha did, as the "Son of God who is coming into the world" we are promised that "though we die, yet shall we live." We are promised that the final say will go to the one who is the resurrection and the life. The one, Jesus, who stood before a dead man's tomb and called "Lazarus, come out."

***Do You Believe This?***

And so, the question for us is the same question Jesus posed to Martha: "Do you believe this?"

This really is a matter of life and death. The Bible teaches that every person must give an account of their life after they die.  A kind of "exit-interview" with God.  And according to what Jesus says in this story, the main question that will be asked us by God is, “Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? Did you put your faith in Jesus alone as Savior and Lord of your life?"  
  
That's what He will someday ask of every person here this morning. That's what every human on the planet needs in order live, even though we die. To have eternal, spiritual life.  
  
I would be foolish to think that everyone here has placed their faith in Jesus Christ and has gotten His free gift of eternal life.  But the Bible says you can do that today.  A simple prayer can express the desire of your heart to trust Christ for salvation.  He will today forgive you of your sins so that you will not perish but have eternal life with Him.  And he will take over your life and be your Lord and Master and Savior.

That's what John 11:25-26 says.  That's what the Bible says.  That's what God says.

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.

Believe in the one who has stolen life back from death. Believe in the Grave Robber.