

## **“I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE”: HOW TO BE HOPEFUL IN A DYING WORLD**

Death is a topic we shy away from, whichever culture has shaped us. Our reasons for not wanting to think about death are obvious.

But if thinking about death is painful, then *not thinking about death* is potentially worse.

It's like our experience of procrastinating over a piece of work. Our anxieties lead us to try and avoid the painful reality, but eventually it makes things much worse. We dig a hole of denial and avoidance that then feels impossible to escape.

So let's tackle the question head on: can we really remain hopeful in a dying world?

In John's Gospel, we meet a family asking this question.

Jesus' friend Lazarus has died. Lazarus was apparently the only male in his family. His death would have dashed his family's hopes and livelihood. His sisters Martha and Mary are left deep in shock and grief.

What complicated matters was that Jesus didn't heal Lazarus, even he was told that he was sick. Jesus loved Lazarus. So why didn't he rush to Lazarus's bedside?

Jesus' answer is cryptic:

“This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.”

But Lazarus was now dead.

So can you sense the emotion in Martha's words as she meets Jesus?

“Lord... if you had been here my brother would not have died.”

Martha's words are respectful. She calls Jesus 'Lord.' She's seemingly not angry or resentful. Yet she can't help but repeat something she and Mary had probably been saying to each other: if only Jesus had been here, things would have gone differently.

Instead, Jesus offers these words:

"Your brother will rise again."

Martha seems to understand Jesus to be saying the kind of thing we often say to grieving people—the equivalent of 'it's only goodbye for now.'

She knows that Lazarus died trusting in God, so she agrees:

"I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day."

Belief in 'the resurrection' was common amongst Jewish people in Martha's day. Fired by the vision of the Old Testament, God's people believed that—on the last day—the entire universe will be renewed. Human sin and its effects will be eliminated forever. The heavens and the earth, human kingdoms and human structures, the sun, moon and stars, even our very bodies—will be brought back to life: resurrected and made new.

It was a hope that seemed to resonate with the deepest human desires and instincts. "Lazarus died with that hope," says Martha.

What Jesus says next is astounding:

"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."

It's outrageous! Standing beside a grieving woman, Jesus claims to be able to undo death. Not just for her brother but for *whoever* believes in him.

Jesus takes the normal human hopelessness and despair we feel towards death, and turns it on its head. He claims that there is a reality greater than death: life in and through him.

He's saying he has the power to resurrect the dead.

So Martha's hopefulness for her brother is no longer merely belief in an old promise. Hope is explaining himself in front of her very eyes, asking her to trust him.

Think of it this way. It's one thing to lend someone a charger. It's an entirely different thing to say you can charge their phone with yourself as the only power source. Yet that's close to what Jesus is claiming here.

Jesus is claiming to be the source of limitless life. Death cannot ultimately threaten him—or anyone connected to him. So he promises not only to give life to dead bodies on the day of resurrection, but also life *right now* to all who believe in him.

In the deepest sense, if you're trusting in Jesus, your eternal life has already started. You will never die. For a time, your body will be dead. But even then, with Jesus, you will live.

Of course, it's one thing to make these claims, another thing to back them up.

Yet that's what Jesus does.

Jesus arrives at Lazarus' tomb, and demands that the stone be taken away. Martha objects. She fears for the smell. Lazarus has been dead for four days!

But Jesus insists, posing a question:

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

We're about to see just how glorious God is; to find out why, after all, Jesus didn't come to heal Lazarus.

Here's what happens next:

Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Here's the physical proof. Jesus gloriously rules not only over disease and illness, but death too. Jesus has total control over death – not the other way around, as it is for every other human.

Death has no power when faced with the source of life itself. And if we belong to him it has no power over us either. After dying, Jesus himself rose. Because Jesus lives, we live. Because he is life, we can know life—now, and one day at the resurrection of all things.

It's not easy living in a world where everything and everyone dies. At present, our world is gripped by death and decay. Nevertheless, with Jesus, we can face the future with confidence.

Though our physical bodies will die, we will not. We need not fear our greatest enemy, because we're safe with Jesus—the one with power over death. And with the hope of being raised, we can joyfully await our day of physical resurrection.

A Victorian preacher once said,

“Someday you will read in the papers, ‘D. L. Moody of East Northfield is dead.’ Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.”

And when *that* grips your heart you can die—and *live*—with courage and boldness.