

## **Women's Bible Study Fall 2011**

Who Do YOU Say I Am? *A study of the names and character of Christ.*

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***He is the Resurrection and the Life - John 11:1-44***

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I'm going to start with a story – a story about my family. A couple of weeks ago John and I went to California to help my mother get ready to move house. After almost 40 years in the same place, she decided that she was ready to move into a lovely apartment near my sisters about 200 miles away. It's a place for retired people, where they provide activities, transportation, and two meals a day, while still being able to live independently in your own place.

After 40 years in the same house, after collecting the lifetime detritus of five children and two adults, there was a vast amount of stuff to get through in order to make the house ready to sell. Some of you have done this – downsized from a 3 bedroom house to a one room apartment. Others of you have done it for your parents or grandparents. However it happens, it's a process which is full of emotion. Things that looked like trash to me were precious to my mom. Things that I wanted were insignificant to another sibling. Because John and I were the first line helpers, we had three days in which to empty as much of the house as we could before my three sisters showed up.

It was tough. I would hold up something - a mug, a recipe book, an old tablecloth, and Mom would say, "Give that to so and so." "Put that in the Salvation Army stuff." And for lots and lots of it, she said "Pack it up. I'll take it or store it til I figure out what I want." There was a painful moment on the first morning when I ordered a dumpster for the driveway because the trash can was already full. She was aghast. "You'll never fill that up." But within a week it was hauled away overflowing. I had to move important papers from the places where she stored them on counters or tables, to a cupboard so the counters would be clear. Within two days Mom couldn't find anything, and was worried sick that we had accidentally thrown away important things.

Then my sister showed up. I thought she'd be delighted at the progress we'd made – half the house was cleared and cleaned. But her face froze and her first words were, "Where is everything?" The next day two more sisters showed up, and the pace picked up enormously...so quickly, in fact, that a couple of them HAD WORDS. Thankfully I was on the plane by then. But you take my point. Leaving a house where everyone has memories, and everyone has a different view of what's important, yet where we all needed to pull together, was taxing.

It was like a death. And yet how extremely grateful I was to be going through this painful process *with my mother there*. She had the chance to tell us what was important for her to keep. And in the end, it was her journals, her photo albums and just some of the books and music that she took. Almost nothing else.

Today we're going to focus on another story – also a story about a family. Like mine, it was a family where the members had different reactions to the same sad situation. But in the end they were able to pull together. It's an unusual story in that its climax comes right in the middle, with Jesus' statement "I am the resurrection and the life". Although the rest of the story is important,

what I want to concentrate on today is, primarily, verses 25 and 26 of John chapter 11. So please turn there with me in your Bibles.

But if I'm going to be a good storyteller, I need to set the scene. So listen as we hear

## I. The Story of Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Jesus

Mary, Martha and Lazarus were three members of a family, three adult siblings living in Bethany, which is no more than two miles out of Jerusalem. They were Jesus' close friends.

Close friends are people for whom you drop everything. You open your home and your heart to them. They are people you trust, both with your confidences and with the ability to truly be yourself when you're with them.

We know from the gospels that Jesus' own family, even his mother Mary, thought he was crazy at the start of his ministry. They worried about him. But Mary, Martha and Lazarus understood who Jesus was and accepted him and loved him. So these three are unique in Jesus' life.

Lazarus became sick. The Greek word used here means "sick unto death" or "sinking fast". This is the kind of sickness that not even Mayo Clinic could cure. And so the sisters sent word to their friend Jesus, not demanding anything but simply saying "**Lord, the one you love is sick.**" (John 11:3). This is a very different request than "Lord, we're your best friends. We love you and serve you. You owe it to us to help our brother." The sisters' request places its faith in Jesus' love for them, not what they've done for him.

So we see in the first part of the story

### A. The Premise for Resurrection (v. 1-24)

Sick, and sinking fast. Jesus did not send word back to the sisters, according to the text, but simply said to those around him "**This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.**" (John 11:4) Now notice that being sick is not incompatible with being a believer. There are some faulty schools of theology which teach that God never wants us to be sick. That's not what Jesus says here. On the contrary – Lazarus' illness will bring glory to God.

That's great for Jesus and the disciples, but meanwhile, Mary and Martha are dismayed to see that no sooner than their messenger had gone, but Lazarus dies. In that hot, hot climate burials had to take place almost instantly because of decay. So within 24 hours of sending off their message, Mary and Martha have buried their brother, wrapped in grave clothes, in a tomb hewn in the rock with a heavy stone rolled in front of it. It's a tomb that sounds very much like the one Jesus will occupy.

Two days later, Jesus says to his disciples that he must return to Judea...a dangerous place for Jesus, as the Jews tried to kill him last time he was there. So he explains about Lazarus, saying that "**Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.**" (John 11:11). They don't understand. If Lazarus is simply sleeping surely he doesn't need Jesus

to wake him up. So he clarifies: **“Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” (John 11:14)**

Is God glad when we die? The death of a believer, from God’s perspective, is always good because it takes him out of this fragmented, evil world we live in and brings him into God’s presence in heaven. Jesus likened Lazarus’ death to sleep. It’s restful. It’s peaceful. But this particular death would be turned to life.

It takes another day for Jesus to arrive, and Martha comes to the road to greet him, saying **“If you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” (John 11:21-22)**

Jesus assures her that her brother will rise again, and Martha assumes that Jesus means Lazarus will rise in the resurrection at the last day – in other words, in the future. She thinks he’s merely being comforting.

This is the leadup to Jesus’ astounding statement, where he identifies himself as  
**B. The Provider of Resurrection (v. 25-27)**

**“Jesus said to her, ‘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. Do you believe this?’” (John 11:25-26)**

Mary responds with a profession of faith. **“Yes, Lord,’ she told him. ‘I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.’” (John 11:27)**

The most important thing Jesus does in chapter 11 is to make this statement. And we will spend most of our time today thinking about what that really means. But in order that Martha and those around him might believe, he provides

**C. The Proof of Resurrection (v. 28-44)**

In verses 28-44 Jesus sends Martha to call Mary to him. Seeing Mary’s distress, he is deeply moved with pity and compassion, and weeps for them and with them. Then he comes to the cave where Lazarus is buried, and tells them to take away the stone. Martha objects – after all, her brother has been buried for four days in this hot climate and rolling away the stone will only reveal what none of them wish to see – the rotting body of Lazarus.

But Jesus reminds them if they believe, they will see the glory of God. (v. 11). Now imagine the scene. The people roll away the stone, leaving the dark, gaping hole of the tomb’s entrance. Amazingly, there is no odor that wafts out from the tomb, but only silence as Jesus looks up to heaven and prays aloud to God, asking that the people watching will believe. Then he shouts 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. Jesus said to them, ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go.’ (John 11:44).**

Now you would think that every single person standing there would fall to their knees and gasp. That they would recognize God with them in Jesus Christ. But even when faced with the resurrection of a very dead corpse, only some of them believed. The rest dashed off to the Pharisees

to tattle on what Jesus had done now. The story of Lazarus resulted in an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin, and we read in verse 53 that “from now on they plotted to take his life.” You see, Lazarus was the final straw. This was war, now. And so Jesus withdrew to Ephraim and no longer moved freely among the Jews. But it was only for a short time, as Passover and the time of Jesus’ own death was drawing near on the calendar.

In fact, six days before Passover, Jesus came back to Bethany and had dinner with Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and Mary anointed him with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair, in order to prepare Jesus for his own burial. (John 12: 1-11) A day later, Jesus rode in triumph on a donkey into Jerusalem with the crowds shouting and waving palm branches. And five days later he was hanging on a cross with the same crowd shouting, “Crucify him”.

You might have wondered why no other gospel recounts a story so important as this one. I believe it was because of the circumstances that followed this resurrection. Jesus’ life was in danger from the moment he raised Lazarus. In releasing Lazarus from death, Jesus effectively signed his own death warrant with the Jews. We know that from John 12:9-11, where we read “**Meanwhile, a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.**” (John 12:9-11).

So not only was God glorified by Lazarus’ resurrection, but God would be glorified by Jesus’ death, which was now on the fast track to completion. Jesus knew that a resurrection would never escape the notice of the authorities – that he had now become too much of a threat.

But people knew. And they talked. Even though Lazarus is never quoted as saying anything in the gospels he must have answered questions. The story of his miraculous resurrection was making both Jesus and Lazarus marked men. The gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote their accounts from AD 50-70, during which time Lazarus was probably still alive. They may have omitted this account to protect him from the Jews. John wrote his gospel around AD 90, by which time Lazarus had died for the second time, and it was safe to tell his story. (James Boice, *The Gospel of John, Vol. III*).

So I’ve told you the story. But now we need to go back and look at the crux of the narrative:

## **II. I am the Resurrection and the Life**

It’s such a simple statement, really, but what does it mean? Let’s look first at the first half, “I am the Resurrection.”

The first thing I notice about this statement is that Jesus says “I am”...not “I am the way to resurrection” or “I am the means of resurrection,” but rather “I AM the resurrection.”

So if we are going to experience resurrection, we have to go through Jesus himself. He’s not pointing the way. He is the way. We must believe in a Person, not an event, even though the event proves that the Person is who he says he is. Hebrews puts it this way: “**Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his**

**body...” (Hebrews 10:19-20)** Jesus himself is resurrection. But resurrection means two things in this passage.

First, there’s

#### **A. Resurrection from Sin**

We think that this passage is just about death and life. But in fact it’s also about sin and forgiveness. The Bible’s pretty blunt about our spiritual condition prior to knowing God. It says that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. Now dead people cannot resurrect themselves. They need Jesus to call them out of the grave. That’s what he does with us before we know him. At that point we are completely dead as a doornail to spiritual things. But he calls our name. And life flows back into our limbs and breath into our lungs and we realize that the poison of sin, that was draining the very life from our veins, has been replaced by Jesus’ blood pulsing in us. We take our first baby steps. We walk again. And eventually we run, with the freedom from sin that Jesus gives us because he is the resurrection from sin.

But Jesus is also the

#### **B. Resurrection from Death**

This is what happened to Lazarus. After four days, his wasn’t just a mistaken burial of someone in a coma. His spirit was completely separated from his body. And part of the reason that Jesus waited for four days may have been to put to rest the Jewish belief that the spirit hovers around the dead body for four days after death, until sufficient decay has set in so that the spirit can no longer identify its former body. This is not biblical teaching, but it was part of Jewish culture at the time. So after four days even the most optimistic Jew would have conceded that Lazarus’ spirit had really left his empty shell of a corpse.

So what happened when Jesus shouted “Lazarus, come out!” He called Lazarus’ spirit back to his body. And Jesus restored that physical body, miraculously. Jesus’ voice has such authority over all spirits that Lazarus’ spirit came running back to his body and sprang to complete life again.

Now this business of being called by one’s name is very important. About a year after John and I were married, we had the privilege of participating in our friends’ wedding. John was performing the service, one of the first weddings he ever did as a minister, and I was the matron of honor. So when it came to that point in the service where Rick and Judy were to take each other’s hands, John whispered to the bride, “Give your flowers to the girl.” By “the girl” he meant me, his wife. Now I know that John knows my name, but under nerves and pressure you can say a lot of dumb things.

But God never mistakes our names. When he calls us to resurrection, whether that’s from our sins or in the future when he calls us out of the grave, he will call us by name, and we come running.

This is why Jesus shouted Lazarus’ name. If he had just said “Come out!” every spirit within earshot would have risen to the authority of the only voice that can raise the dead. But I think it also shows a deep truth about God, and that is that he knows us by name. We are not just an amorphous mass of people – “mankind” or “the crowd”. We are individuals known to God and that is very precious.

We might worry about how God could possibly call us back to life after we have been cremated, or smashed to bits in an auto accident, or after an autopsy has removed all our organs. Don’t you

think that God, who created an entire world out of nothing and the first human out of the dust of the earth, has the authority to gather together the molecules that he needs to give us a resurrection body? All matter in the universe, from the smallest particle to the largest star, responds to the voice of its Creator. If Jesus upholds the universe by his word of power, then the universe knows its master. And the molecules that he needs to create our resurrection bodies will sprint like Olympic runners when he calls us to rise from the grave at his return to earth. No tomb – no decay – no coffin – will prevent us from responding to our name when he calls us to rise. Paul describes it like this: **“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, and with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”** (1 Thess. 4:16-17)

At Winston Churchill’s funeral, a trumpeter played “Taps” – the song that is used to signal the end of the day in military life. But no sooner had he finished playing taps, then the sound of reveille was heard – the trumpet song that wakens the soldier to a new day. Churchill understood that when we end the days of our life in death we immediately wake to a new morning in eternal life.

We know that Jesus is the resurrection because he himself was resurrected from death – not temporarily, like Lazarus, who eventually went on to die a second physical death, but eternally, in the sense that he defeated death forever. Hebrews puts it like this: **“so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”** (Heb. 2:9). When we taste something, we can tell immediately whether it’s salty, sour, bitter or sweet. If it tastes foul, we spit it out. If it is delicious, we swallow it. Tasting is different than eating. Tasting implies that we experience enough of that substance to know whether it’s good, or not. That’s what Jesus did with death. He fully died and experienced physical death like that of any human being, yet because he proclaimed triumphantly to Satan that the grave could not hold him, Jesus tasted death rather than irreversibly experiencing it. And in tasting, he conquered it.

So, Jesus says, if you want dying to be just a transitory, impermanent way station to eternal life, you need to go through Me. I am the Resurrection. I resurrect you from sin, and I resurrect you from death.

But Jesus’ statement isn’t complete without the second half: I am the resurrection AND THE LIFE. It’s not just that he has saved us *from* something; he has saved us *for something*.

### C. Life Now

Mary missed an important point in her response to Jesus. When he said “your brother will rise again” (John 11:23) she responded “I know he’ll rise again in the future.” She thought that Jesus was comforting her. But Jesus meant Lazarus to have real life right now.

Remember a few weeks ago when we talked about Jesus’ statement “I am the bread of life”? Part of what he said in that passage is that he brings real life. We think what we have is real, because we don’t know any differently. In this statement, *I am the resurrection and the life*, Jesus says that he will give us REAL LIFE now, once we’ve been resurrected from our sins. Not just in the future, but now. It’s only a shadow of what we’ll have in eternity, but it’s still real life now, full of joy.

I had a glimpse of this on Sunday morning. There I was, singing with the choir and the congregation, when suddenly I thought, I wish I could go on doing this forever. It's so great, standing here worshipping with all the family of God, knowing that around the world other congregations are praising him as well. Just as suddenly I realized that I CAN go on doing this forever. Worship is the work of heaven. Our most transcendent experience of God in this life will be our everyday experience in heaven. But we don't want to make the mistake of wasting our whole life here on earth thinking that the good stuff is only in the future. No, real life is right here and right now. And we might be missing out on it if we don't savor what is true and beautiful about this good world that God has created.

But it's also true that Jesus is talking about

#### **D. Life Eternal**

Only life that is truly life can stand the trial of death. The Greek word "zoe" is used here, and only God's "zoe" life goes on when all other forms of life, the most alive things we see all around us, eventually die. Jesus IS that "zoe" life. He, and those he calls like you and me, go on.

Let's go back to the story of my mom's house for a moment. While we were in the midst of this project, it was easy to concentrate on the work that had to be done and the goal to be met - we wanted to get the house ready to put on the market, and we did it in seven days. It was on the market for one day. She had two full offers by that night. The house went into escrow, and last Friday, the deal fell through. Now she's in escrow with the second offer. And we hope that this one will come to completion, bringing a new, young family into that house to raise their children where we grew up.

I was very much taken by surprise to feel so emotional about that house. Frankly, it's a small, 80 year old place and was always so stuffed with books, furniture and all our things that it was not that attractive. Yet it's the place where I last saw my father alive. I hauled his chair off to be given away - the chair where I last saw him, struggling with the congestive heart failure that took his life two months later, while I was 2,000 miles away in Minnesota. It's the street where John proposed to me, down on one knee on the gearshift in his borrowed 1960's VW bug.

It's the house where my brother Ron and I became best friends in our high school years. It's the house where I spent countless hours listening to my little sister play her Steinway grand piano. It's the house where I lived until the night before my wedding, when I moved into my husband's house. It's the house where our daughter Kirstie took her first steps.

For 22 years it's been the base I returned to once or twice a year, the living room strewn with our backpacking gear, or Nicky's or Emily's toys, the changing indicators of growing children who loved that house for the fresh oranges that grew in the backyard and the novelty of being in California and the kindness of their grandparents.

The heart of this house, the person who kept it all humming along, was my mother. My mother, with her immense creativity in painting, writing, playing the flute. My mother, who was savvy enough to learn the computer in her 60's and now is far more "wired" with electronics than I am. My mother, who's bravely chosen to leave the familiar and go to the new and says she's never

going to cook another meal as long as she lives. My mother, who along with my father showed us how to be a family.

You know, it's just a house. But it's a house where love lived. And I want to tell that new family that no one ever shouted at each other here. That we laughed a lot. That we always had music playing. That it was not just a house. It was a home.

How can we leave all these good, earthly things? They are just... things. They only have meaning, because the people we love have clothed them with meaning. We cling to life, because life is good. But the life we know here, Jesus tells us, is only a pale shadow of the good and true resurrection life that we will have. I loved that house in California. But in comparison to the life that waited me here in Minnesota, in comparison to the house I now live in, that house was just a prelude, a hint of what awaited me in this home, with my own children and husband, and my beloved church. And when the time comes for me to leave this life, although I will be awash with emotion over what I'm leaving, I believe that this good life will be like my house in California – just a prelude, a hint, of what's coming next in my true life in the presence of God in heaven.

Paul tells us,

**“Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands...Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 5:1; 5)**

May God grant us that resurrection life now and in the future. Amen.

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