

## The Power and Compassion of Jesus

John 11:17-44

*Bryn MacPhail / Mar. 6, 2011*

Throughout the Scriptures, human beings are often depicted as struggling to see what I would call, “The bigger picture”.

What is frequently the case is that our vision for the future becomes stunted by our preoccupation with the present.

Furthermore, our vision for the future tends to be limited by our existing set of experiences.

This is precisely what we see in Martha as she goes out to greet Jesus following the death of her brother, Lazarus.

Martha says to Jesus, “**Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died**” (11:21).

It is not that Martha is altogether devoid of faith. Martha articulates, in this account, her conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (11:27).

In addition, Martha evidently held the conviction that Jesus could heal the sick.

However, *Martha’s perspective is limited in at least two ways.*

First of all, she says to Jesus, “**if you had been here, my brother would not have died**”. Martha’s perspective is that Jesus is too late. Martha’s view is that *Jesus needed to arrive by a particular time* if Lazarus was to be healed.

Secondly, Martha's perspective was limited in terms of *space*. She says, **"if you had been here, my brother would not have died"**. Martha's view was that the healing of Lazarus could only happen if Jesus was physically present.

Perhaps she had not heard the account of when Jesus healed a centurion's servant without even being in the presence of the ailing person (Lk. 7:1-10).

I do not mean to unduly criticize Martha here because I reckon that I might very well have said the same thing.

By pointing out Martha's limited perspective, I only mean to highlight the limitations of our perspective as it relates to God's working in our lives and in this world.

Thankfully, Martha eventually puts her trust in Jesus. After initially lamenting that He did not arrive at their house in time, she eventually confesses to Jesus, **"Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you"** (11:22).

Friends, here is a demonstration of why faith is so vital. On this side of heaven, our view of God, and our view of the way things are, will inevitably be limited.

For this reason, our posture before God must be the posture of *humility*, understanding that there is much that we cannot see.

Along with a posture of humility, we will be well-served by the posture of *faith*, trusting that God is capable of doing what needs to be done.

This becomes Martha's posture.

And what a merciful response Jesus gives to her, "**Your brother shall rise again**" (11:23).

Jesus responds to Martha's faith with a blessed promise—Lazarus will live again.

Even still, Martha's perspective remains limited—she can't seem to overcome her conviction that the time of opportunity to heal Lazarus has passed, "**I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day**", she says to Jesus (11:24).

We see a measure of optimism in Martha's response, but her optimism is tempered by her view of reality.

That's our challenge, isn't it? In attempting to be pragmatic, in attempting to be guided by *reasonable expectations*, we run the danger of settling for less than what is possible if Jesus were to apply His power.

We possess a modicum of faith in Jesus, but often our view of what Jesus can accomplish is often quite small.

We imagine that things like congregational growth and spiritual progress are limited by statistical probability and the natural ordering of things.

And then we, like Martha, have our limited notions shattered by Jesus, who says, "**I am the Resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die**" (11:25, 26).

It's probably not a wise idea to rank the importance of Jesus' statements, but I'm guessing that you would agree that this is one of the most profound claims made by Jesus during His earthly ministry.

Jesus declares that He possesses authority over life and death.

**“Do you believe this?”** He asks Martha.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say, “How does that make you *feel*?”

Jesus has promised a most wonderful benefit and then He links the enjoyment of this benefit to *belief*.

And this question isn't simply for Martha—this question is for you and for me.

Notice how Jesus is not calling for an ambiguous, general, kind of belief from us, but rather He asks quite specifically, **“Do you believe *this*?”** . . .

‘Do you believe I am who I say I am, and do you believe that I possess the power to bestow life in the face of death?’

As I trained to be a minister in the early 1990s, the thing I found most difficult was the need for me to regularly deal with death. This difficulty stemmed from my childhood as I struggled to cope with my father's sudden death as an eleven year-old boy.

I don't know if this will sound strange to you, but I *still* struggle quite a bit with death.

I don't think death is something a person can easily get used to.

Perhaps some of you gathered here this morning can relate to this.

And while I regard death as one of the most difficult aspects of my vocation, I must confess that *my eventual response to death* is the reason I am standing here today.

As a young man, I was awoken from my grief by these very words, **“I am the Resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die”** (11:25, 26).

Do you believe this?

To help Martha’s belief, and to help along the faith of those grieving with Martha, *Jesus determined to provide a foretaste of the Resurrection.*

Jesus determined to bring Lazarus, four days in the grave, back from the dead (11:39).

But before He does that, we see Jesus respond to death in a very human way:

The apostle John records that, at the tomb of Lazarus, **“Jesus wept”** (11:35).

There are not enough words on this earth to describe the profundity of that statement.

The second member of the Trinity, the Creator of the Universe, the Saviour of the world—*weeping* at the grave of a friend.

This is the One who has authority over life and death . . .

Jesus knows that in a few minutes Lazarus will be alive again, and yet at the sight of His friend's dead body, in the midst of a gathering of mourners, Jesus weeps.

As a man, Jesus shares our grief . . . but, as the Son of God, Jesus does not share our limited perspective.

As He orders the gravestone removed, Jesus persists in His attempts to expand Martha's perspective, "**Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?**" . . . **(And Jesus) cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth' (And) he who had died came forth**" (11:40, 43, 44).

Lazarus would eventually die again—some day in the future we presume—but the lesson should not be lost on us. *Jesus demonstrates a power over death.*

And through His own Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus demonstrates *a permanent authority over death.*

For this reason, the grief of a believer is different—the grief of a believer is tempered by *hope*.

Again the benefit promised is connected to belief—the benefit of eternal life is for "**he who believes in Me**", says Jesus.

In other words, the grand point in all of this is that *Jesus should be believed in.*

His power should be believed in. His kind intentions should be trusted.

And if we want to strengthen our belief and trust in Jesus, the means are readily available: Pray often to the Lord, and study His Word.

These two disciplines are known to foster and strengthen faith in Jesus and His promises.

And these two disciplines will help to expand our limited perspective of what Christ is capable of and what He is willing to do.

Jesus shattered Martha's expectations.

Martha's perspective was confined to the natural and normal ordering of things. Martha's vision of the future was stunted by her preoccupation of the present.

I think we can be like that sometimes.

I think congregations can be like that sometimes.

Could it be that we sometimes miss out on what Christ wants for the Kirk in the future because we remain unduly fixated on the present, and the current ordering of things?

Or, could it be that we're fixated on something that happened in the past?

In addition to strengthening our belief in Jesus Christ, the raising of Lazarus should serve as a powerful reminder that we worship a God "**who is able to do abundantly beyond all that we ask or think**" (Eph. 3:20).

As a pastor and as a person that promise is a solid rock for me to lean upon.

I realize that the philosophers, talk show hosts, and motivational speakers of our day have a markedly different approach.

The message we often hear from them is “You can do it! Look within yourself. You can do this!”

This is *not* the message of Scripture. The message of Scripture is that “*He can do it.*”

*God* is able to do abundantly beyond what we can even ask or think.

God can fill a church building that has not been filled in 50 years.

God can repair a relationship which appears to be coming apart.

God can heal the wounds caused by conflict and betrayal.

God can help us to do things which are beyond our natural abilities.

Remember, this is the God who created the Universe and everything in it.

This is the God who told Job that He commands the morning, and that the waves of the ocean obey Him (Job 38:11, 12).

This is the God who made Lazarus alive after being dead in the tomb four days.



Friends, I stand before you this morning with a message of great hope.

But the message is not “You can do it”.

The message is that “*He* can do it.”

What remains is our believing in Him. What remains is our seeking Him in prayer and in reading the Scriptures.

This is where we meet Jesus.

Have you ever gotten lost while driving in your car?

You’ve lost your way, and your spouse is in the passenger seat and is pleading with you to pull over and to ask for directions.

You resist, and resist, and then you finally give in, and you get directions which immediately put you on the correct road.

Has that ever happened to you?

It’s happened to me many times, and each time I feel extremely foolish.

I feel foolish that I let my pride get in the way of reaching my destination.

I don’t want any of us to let our pride get in the way of our reaching a blessed destination in this world and in the next.

He is able. He is abundantly able. Ask Jesus for help.

He is full of power, and He is full of compassion. Amen.

