

On Monday of this week I happened to be in the car, listening to talk radio, when the regularly scheduled broadcast was interrupted by an update from Dr. Henry. Last weekend over 400 people tested positive for Covid 19. She listed a series of outbreaks, in different Care Homes and Schools, in different regions of our Province. She paused to offer condolences on the two Covid related deaths that took place over the weekend. She also updated the overall numbers—over 12,000 people infected, and 256 deaths.

These updates are meant to keep us informed and to remind everyone that the threat of Covid is still real. But the unintended consequence is fear. In a secular society, there is no greater fear than the fear of death. If this life is all there is, people are desperate to hang on to it with all they've got. Dr. Henry's reports inform the public but they don't make anyone feel safer. Fear is just under the surface of people's lives. I can see it in their eyes; I can hear it in their voices.

At a time like this, I'm grateful to be able to say, please turn in your Bibles with me to John 11. In this present moment of human history, John 11 is a bedrock text for the world. And for those who find themselves afraid of death, may this text help to cultivate both peace and hope. I'm going to read John 11 in its entirety.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified

through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, 7 and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

8 "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. 10 It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

11 After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." 12 His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." 13 Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. 14 So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When 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. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise

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

25 Jesus said to her, “I AM the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26** and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” **27** “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

28 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.”

29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.

30 Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. **31** When 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.

32 When 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.” **33** When 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. **35** Jesus wept. **36** Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” **37** But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

38 Jesus, 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 odour, for he has been there four days.” **40** Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. **42** I 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.” **43** When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” **44** 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.”

45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. **46** But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. **47** Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs. **48** If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”

49 Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! **50** You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” **51** He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, **52** and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. **53** So from that day on they plotted to take his life.”

John, regularly refers to Jesus' miracles as *signs*. Jesus' miracles were more than displays of power, they were *signs* pointing to His true identity. While Lazarus features prominently in this account, it is Jesus who occupies the centre. Death is the one great foe that none of us can defeat, but to Jesus, death is like a sleep from which one need only be awakened. He is Master over Life and Death. In Jesus we find Resurrection and Life.

This morning I want to ask you, *what difference does it make to face death with Jesus at our side?*¹ I'll keep coming back to this question throughout my message, but what I'd like to do is walk through the 4 movements of John's account, in order to shed light on Jesus' identity. In the first movement...

1. Jesus receives word that Lazarus has Died (vs. 1-10).

The story begins with two sisters, Martha and Mary, sending word to Jesus that their brother was sick. Vs. 5 tells us that Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus, but curiously, when He heard about Lazarus' condition, He remained where He was for another two days.

Many have wondered why, but vs. 14 gives us a hint. Jesus didn't hurry to Bethany because He knew that Lazarus had died on the day the messengers were sent; we can assume that the Holy Spirit revealed it to Him. Jesus spent two more days where He was and it took one day to get to Bethany; when Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been in the grave 4 days.

But Jesus was emphatic that Lazarus' sickness would not end in death (vs. 4); he was merely "*sleeping*" (vs. 11). In light of what had happened, how could Jesus say these things? The Holy Spirit revealed to Jesus that He raise Lazarus from the dead.

Upon hearing Jesus' travel plans, the disciples immediately protested; Bethany was only three kilometres from Jerusalem. On two different occasions, in the previous 6 months, Jerusalem's leaders had tried to kill Jesus.² The disciples were afraid, for Jesus and for themselves, but fear didn't stop Jesus from doing His Father's bidding. In verse 9, Jesus asked, "*Are there not 12 hours of daylight?*" In other words, "*My life is in God's hands and I have all the time I need.*"

I wonder, with our lives on the line, would we have gone to Bethany? Fear whispers to us: *Play it safe! Run, hide, live to see another day!* When our focus in life is self-preservation we end up living a small, fear-filled, life. We have the same 12 hours of daylight that Jesus had; our lives in are in God's hands too—we have all the time we need. Like Jesus, we will not live a second more—or less—than the Father has determined. We can't live freely without embracing this truth.

The second movement in the story begins in verse 11; here Jesus begins to frame the subject of death in light of His identity.

2. Jesus Frames Death In Light of His Identity (vs. 11-35). In the ancient world, just like our own, the fear of death was pervasive. In

¹ Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John*, 325.

² C.f. John 8:59 and 10:31

our own time, the fear of death is regularly expressed in a number of ways:

(a) First, we go to outrageous lengths in our medical system to prevent death. My wife has spent her entire nursing career working in the ICU, or, working with palliative patients in their homes. I have heard many, many stories of people who exhaust every medical treatment option, including being kept alive with the assistance of machines and medication—for months—with no hope of recovery, and no quality of life. Why? Either they, or their loved ones, are terrified of death.

(b) And second, we do our best to keep death quiet. People rarely see death anymore. Not so long ago, it would be normal for a person to die at home, surrounded by their loved ones. Today, death happens behind closed doors, in hospitals or hospices, and the only ones to see death are paid professionals.

When we talk about someone who has died, more often than not, we try to avoid using the word “death.” We’ll say things like, “*Jon passed away*,” or, “*Janet has gone to a better place*.” Gone to a better place? Sometimes I want to ask, “*Are they on vacation, or, have they died?*” I’m not trying to be irreverent, I’m simply pointing out that we find ways to talk about death without actually talking about death.

Here’s the question: **What difference does it make to face death with Jesus at our side?** In vs. 25-26 Jesus said, “*The one who believes in me will live, even though they die... Do you believe this?*”

It’s hard to overemphasize the difference Jesus makes. It’s not that faith in Jesus means we can avoid death altogether, Christians still die, but to the Christian, death is like falling sleep—we **know** that we will awake.³ The question is, *do you believe this? Have you placed your life in the hands of Jesus?*

illus: It’s been 14 years since my Mom died. When my mom was initially diagnosed with leukemia, she was told that she might have 6 months to live, but we were all blessed with an extra 12 months.

And in those 18 months, my mom and I talked about life, death, and life-after-death dozens of times; it became a natural part of our conversation. It wasn’t morbid but it was real (and raw). We talked openly about human frailty, about fear, and about what we were looking forward to on the other side of death. Two weeks before she died, she told me that she was ready. She knew Jesus, she knew what He had promised, she trusted Him; because Jesus died and rose again, my mom knew that one day, she would be raised too.

When you think about it, Lazarus had a very unique relationship with death. He died, was raised to life, and then lived another decade—or two, or three—before lying on his deathbed for a second time. I wonder, what was it like facing death the second time? Knowing what Jesus did the first time, did faith outweigh His fear?

Anyone who has ever walked through the stages of grief will tell you that anger is a normal part of the process. We might be angry with the person who died—*how could they leave us alone?* We might be

³ This is the point Jesus is making in 11:11-15.

angry with ourselves—*I didn't reconcile our broken relationship. We might be angry with God—why didn't you heal them?*

In verse 33, we read that when Jesus saw the people weeping, “*he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*” Many scholars believe that the English translation is too weak. What has been translated “*deeply moved*” could also be translated as “*outrage, fury, or anger.*”⁴

Death makes Jesus angry too, but He isn't just angry, He is also moved by our grief, pain, and loss. Jesus knows what it is to feel angry and sad all at the same time. But facing death with Jesus at our side allows us to give voice to our anger and sadness without losing hope. The One who stands with us is not powerless in the face of death—He is resurrection and life.

And at this point we come to the third movement in the story.

3. Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead (vs. 38-44). There was stone covering Lazarus' grave, and Jesus asked for it to be removed. Then Jesus shouted, “*Lazarus, come out!*” And Lazarus came out, grave clothes and all.

It's taken 42 verses of buildup to get to this point, to get to the actual resurrection, and in two verses it's all over. Jesus calls to Lazarus, and he comes out. John wants to make sure that we see what this *sign* points to; it points to Jesus, the Master over Life and Death.

And this leads us to the 4th movement, beginning in vs. 45.

4. Some Believe, Others Plot His Death (vs. 45-53). This account is ripe with irony—because Jesus gives life to the dead, His enemies plot His death. Caiaphas was a shrewd leader who was well-versed in the politics of empire; he rightly saw Jesus as a threat. *We can't have Jesus going around—raising the dead—or everyone will follow Him. And if everyone starts following, there will be an uprising, and then Rome will come and destroy everyone and everything.*

Caiaphas saw Jesus' death as necessary, as, collateral damage: “*it is better for one man to die for the people than that the whole nation perish.*” Clearly, Caiaphas spoke more than he knew. Jesus' death, and subsequent resurrection, was God's plan to save the entire world.

When we face death with Jesus at our side, we do so knowing that our sin has been forgiven. With Jesus at our side, and the Holy Spirit within us, we can live freely, boldly, knowing that there is more than enough time to be and do what God has planned for us.

With Jesus at our side, fear doesn't have to overwhelm us—in life, or as we face death. We may not know *when* we will die, or *how*, but we do know *what* comes next. We close our eyes in this life and we awaken in the next to find that we are fully alive and Jesus is with us. The question is, *do you believe this? Have you placed your life in His hands? Will you surrender your fear to Him today?* **Pray**

The Lord's Supper: The night before Jesus died, He shared a final meal with His disciples—the last supper. He took bread, broke it and gave it to His disciples saying, “*This is my body, given for you.*” In the same way, He passed around a cup saying, “*This cup is the new*

⁴ Burge, 318.

covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” The meaning was lost on His disciples but He was talking about His death and what it would achieve. Forgiveness, redemption, salvation, for the world.

Later that night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was afraid. We don't think of Jesus as being afraid, but He was—at least once—when He faced His own death. And in those moments of fear, Jesus did what we are all meant to do, He turned His face to the Father in trust and surrender. *My life is in your hands. When I die, I know what comes next—resurrection.*

We eat this Holy Meal remembering Jesus' death and what it accomplished; He is resurrection and life. Even though we die, because of Jesus, we will live again. As you eat and drink this morning, offer your fear to Jesus. May this meal fill us with peace and nourish our hope.

Worship

Benediction: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, “*And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don't want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus.*”⁵

⁵ The Message.