

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. Whether this is your first time here, or you have been here for a long time, I trust you have felt welcome and that you've been able to engage as we have sung, prayed, and listened to the Scripture being read.

Easter is one of the central celebrations in the Christian Church. On Good Friday we remember the death Jesus died on the cross; on Sunday we remember that Jesus rose from the dead. There is nothing "good" about Jesus' death on that ancient Friday, without the corresponding empty tomb on the Sunday that followed.

This morning my sermon is going to centre around two words that are at the heart of the Christian faith—the first is **resurrection** and the second is **joy**. Because of the resurrection, we choose to live in joy. Gordon Smith writes, "Integrity demands that we feel the force of the brokenness of this world—anger at injustice, discouragement in the face setback, mourning where there is loss, fear when our lives are threatened. But we cannot stay there... We are most ourselves when we live in joy, for which we were created."¹

How does the resurrection of Jesus lead us to joy? In light of the resurrection, we see, feel, and grieve all that is wrong with the world, knowing that our present experience is not the last word. God is not finished with us or with the world. Rescue is coming. Healing is coming. Transformation is coming. Because He has risen, we too can rise. Knowing this, we choose to live in joy.

This morning, I want to tell you two stories. The first story comes from the Bible and features Jesus and His friend Lazarus, the second story comes from my own family—both stories centre around resurrection and joy. I am going to begin with the story about Jesus and Lazarus, and if you would like to follow along, you can find the entire story in John 11. If you are using the Blue Bible from the seat rack in front of you, you can find the story on page 871.

1. Jesus and Lazarus:

a. Jesus hears 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. In vs. 5, John tells us that Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Jesus had spent time with these three—eating with them, laughing with them, enjoying their company.

But when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick—presumably, really sick, and in desperate need of healing—Jesus didn't drop everything and immediately rush to the home of His friend. Why not? The first reason is that Jesus was more than a day's travel from where Lazarus lived. The second reason is that Jesus knew—presumably by the Holy Spirit—that Lazarus had died on the same day that Martha's message reached Him. By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had already been in the grave 4 days.

When Jesus set out for Bethany, He did so with a sense of purpose and confidence, but it's worth noting that His disciples came along filled with a sense of fear. Bethany was located a little over two kilometres east of Jerusalem, and the disciples were worried that

¹ Gordon Smith, *A Holy Meal*, 101.

word would get out about Jesus' arrival. On two different occasions, in the past year, Jesus had been in Jerusalem and the crowds had tried to kill Him.² Jesus was a person of faith and courage; fear never stopped Him from doing the Father's bidding. In verse 9, Jesus asked, "*Are there not 12 hours of daylight?*" In other words, "*I have all the time I need to do what the Father has asked of me—I'm not going to die, at anyone's hands, before the appointed time.*"

Avoiding difficulty and pain is a priority for most of us. Wherever possible we tend to choose the path of least resistance. Jesus wasn't driven by fear; faith is what propelled Him—He put His trust in the Father's plan.

The same can be true of us. We have the same 12 hours of daylight. In other words, we have all the time we need to accomplish what the Father has given us to do—no more, but no less. When we embrace this truth, we can stop trying to grasp and control the situations we find ourselves in, and the people around us. God is present and our lives rest in His hands.

b. Looking at Death from Jesus' Perspective (vs. 11-35): When I read this story, I am struck by the faith, courage, and confidence of Jesus, but more, I am challenged by the way He looks at the world. In particular, I am struck by the way that He thinks about death.

In spite of the fact that Lazarus had died, Jesus was emphatic that Lazarus' sickness would not end in death (vs. 4). In fact, Jesus told His disciples that Lazarus was merely "*sleeping*" (vs. 11). Before

leaving for Bethany, Jesus knew that Lazarus had died, and, that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead.

It's impossible to overemphasize the difference Jesus makes. In the ancient world, just like our own, the fear of death was rampant. Woody Allen once joked, "*It's not that I'm afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens.*" We live at a time, where we have done our best to deny death, and this has taken a number of forms.

First, we go to outrageous lengths in our medical system to prevent death. My wife works in the ICU and she regularly tells me stories of people who are kept alive on machines for months—people who have no hope of recovery, and no quality of life; they are kept alive because they or their loved ones are so fearful of death.

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 almost exclusively in hospitals or hospices, and often, the only ones to see death are paid professionals.

When we talk about someone who has died, more often than not, we try to stay away from even using the word "death." We'll say things like, "*Jim passed away,*" or, "*Sally has gone to a better place*". The story of Lazarus draws us in and not simply into his story but into our own. Lazarus died, and death awaits us all but the question is, *what difference does it make to face death with Jesus at our side?*

² The previous 3, a crowd had tried to kill Jesus during the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn. 8:59). A few months later during the winter Hanukkah Feast, they tried to kill Him again (Jn. 10:31). This trip to Bethany happened sometime after Hanukkah but before the upcoming Passover Feast where Jesus was crucified.

When Martha heard that Jesus was nearing her house, she left the house and went out to meet Him on the road. As they talk back and forth Jesus told Martha that her brother would rise again. Jesus didn't have to convince Martha, she already believed in resurrection—this was a part of her faith as an orthodox Jew. She believed that at the end of the age, God would return, He would judge sin, deal with the brokenness of the world, the dead would be raised, and God would set up His kingdom on earth. For Martha, resurrection was a future reality.

In vs. 25-26 Jesus declared, *“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.”* Jesus was claiming that resurrection wasn't simply a future event, resurrection was here and now because He Himself had power over life and death. Jesus then followed this claim with a question—*do you believe this Martha?*

There's no way around death, each of us will face the grave, the question is: *will we face the grave with Jesus at our side? Will we place our life, our faith, in the hands of the One who has power over life and death?*

If you have ever walked through the grieving process, you have felt a range of emotions, including anger. Anger can surface in a number of ways. We might be angry at the person who died—*“if they had taken better care of themselves, or, made better decisions they would still be here.”* We might say to ourselves, *“How could they leave me like this?”*

Sometimes, when a loved one dies, we are angry with ourselves: *“I never told them how I really felt, we didn't reconcile our broken relationship and now it's too late.”* We might even be angry at God: *“how could you let this happen? Why didn't you heal them?”*

In verse 33 we read that Jesus saw the people weeping over Lazarus' death and *“he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.”* Many Bible scholars believe the English translation here is too weak. What has been translated *“deeply moved”* could also be translated as *“outrage, fury, or anger.”*³

Does it comfort you to know that death makes Jesus angry too? Jesus is angry about the devastation that comes with death, and more, He is profoundly saddened—He's moved by our grief, pain, and loss. Verse 34-35 tell us that when He saw people's grief, He broke down and wept.

Jesus feels what we feel but the difference is that Jesus is not powerless in the face of death. Ask yourself, *what difference would it make to grieve over death with Jesus at your side?*

c. Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead (vs. 38-44). Jesus turned to Martha and Mary and asked, *“Where have you laid Lazarus?”* When they brought Jesus to where Lazarus had been buried, He asked the crowd to remove the stone from in front of the tomb. When they had done so, in a loud voice Jesus commanded, *“Lazarus, come out!”* And Lazarus came out, grave clothes and all.

³ Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John*, 318.

If you read the story, it takes 42 verses of buildup to get to this point—to get to the actual resurrection—and in two verses it's all over. Jesus commands Lazarus to come forth, and Bob's your uncle. It's one thing to claim you have power over death, it's another thing to raise someone from the dead. There was a crowd of mourners in front of Lazarus' tomb, how long do you think it took before the weeping became shouts of joy?

4. Some Believe, Others Plot His Death (vs. 45-53). After this miracle of resurrection, one might think that Jesus would be elevated to celebrity status everywhere He went. And while there were those who heard about Lazarus' resurrection and put their trust in Jesus, others heard the same story and began to plot His death.

The ruling priests and religious leaders of Jerusalem saw Jesus as a threat that needed to be eliminated. How was Jesus a threat? If the people proclaimed Jesus to be both Messiah and King, and word got back to Rome, their army would march in and utterly destroy Jerusalem. Rome took uprisings very seriously.

The High Priest at the time—Caiaphas—had been looking for a way to have Jesus killed. Earlier in the year he had said the following concerning Jesus: *“it is better for one man to die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”* It's ironic isn't it? Caiaphas thought that if Jesus died, Israel would be saved. What Caiaphas didn't know was that Jesus' death and resurrection would do more than save Israel—Jesus would break the power of sin and death itself. In His death and resurrection, Jesus would offer rescue, healing, and transformation to the world.

A grave in Bethany provided the opportunity for resurrection. Lazarus was dead, and then he wasn't. People were grieving, and then they were filled with joy. This resurrection was a preview of what was coming; in a matter of months Jesus would die on a cross, be buried in a tomb, and three days later He would rise from the dead.

2. Christians come back to the story of Jesus' death and resurrection again and again because this story shapes and informs our own.

In 2005, at the age of 58, my mom was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia. She was still in the prime of life and had all kinds of things to live for. She was a devoted wife, mother, and grandmother. She had all kinds of interests, from baking, to sewing, to reading, to gardening and floral arrangement. My mom was a people person; she loved people and people loved her. She was at her best behind the scenes serving the practical needs of others. When people felt lost or alone they would call my mom; she would listen, love, encourage, and pray.

My mom wasn't ready to die—who is? But, my mom was ready for what comes after death.

John Stackhouse, a Christian theologian, writes, “Many Canadians, even those who have attended church, imagine the next life as our souls flying up to heaven, being handed a white robe, being assigned a particular cloud, and being issued a harp to play...forever. How do you prepare for that “Far Side” cartoon-version of heaven: an

endless, dull worship service? Presumably by finding the most boring church in town and attending its meetings as often as you can.”⁴

The Bible has many things to say about the life to come, but it’s a far cry from clouds, harps, and eternal church services. Instead, think Earth 2.0. All of creation renewed—no more famine, or plague, or earthquakes. All of earth’s inhabitants renewed—no more violence and oppression; no more jealousy and competition; no more loneliness and isolation. The final chapters of the Bible envision heaven coming down, God Himself will dwell in our midst, transforming everyone and everything.

My mom knew these truths from the time she was young. These truths had always been important to her, but as her life drew to an end, these truths became more and more precious; she and I talked about them often. In one sense, mom wasn’t ready to die, but she was ready for what comes after death.

My mom lived her life to the fullest, she loved as freely and generously as she could, she tried to do right, but she was far from perfect. Even if she had been granted another 30 years of life, she would have still fallen short. But my mom wasn’t aiming for perfection; she knew that she would never measure up to God’s standard, and, that she didn’t have to.

My mom had entrusted her life to Jesus. The death Jesus died, He died for her—He carried her sin, her shame, her failures to the cross.

My mom lived with a sense of lightness, freedom, and joy because of her experience of God’s forgiveness.

My mom would be quick to tell you that facing life with Jesus at your side makes all the difference in the world. Because she experienced God’s forgiveness, she was quick to forgive others—she refused to hold on to bitterness. Because she experienced God’s love, she learned how to love others—she was thoughtful, selfless, and generous.

When Mom was diagnosed with Leukemia, she was given six months to live, but ended up living for 18 months. When it became clear that mom wouldn’t make it to her 60th birthday, we threw the biggest 59th birthday party we could. Invitations went out to family, friends, and neighbours; the house was filled to overflowing. And the thing I remember most about that party was the palpable sense of joy.

Two weeks before my Mom’s death, she told me that she was ready to die. My mom knew what was waiting for her the moment after she took her last breath; her confidence stemmed from a life lived with Jesus. She knew Him, she knew what He had promised, she trusted Him. Because Jesus died and rose again from the dead, my mom knew that one day she would be raised too.

My mom died at home, on a Friday night, with my dad, my brothers, and our wives crowded around her bed. Being present when she

⁴ This quote comes from the message John recently preached at a memorial service. John Stackhouse is a former professor of mine, and I have continued to learn from him through his writing; he has been instrumental in teaching me to think Christianly about many things, including death. It’s with his perspective in mind that I have framed my experience of my mom in her final 18 months.

crossed over from this life to the next remains one of the most significant moments in my life.

In light of Jesus' resurrection, we grieve all that is wrong with the world, knowing that our present experience is not the last word. God is not finished with us or with the world. Rescue is coming. Healing is coming. Transformation is coming. Because He has risen, we too can rise. Knowing this, we choose to live in joy.

Joy isn't the same thing as happiness. Happiness is more fleeting; it rises and falls according to the nature of our circumstances. Joy is more weighty, it remains even in difficulty, pain, and loss because it is tied to the One who cannot be moved. Jesus Christ, dead, resurrected, and ascended to the Father's right hand—even now He is seated on the throne of the universe and He is praying God's best for you, for me, for the world.

When we face today with Jesus at our side, we do so knowing that the penalty of sin has been paid for us; Jesus has made a way for us to be reconciled to God. With Jesus at our side, and the Holy Spirit within us, we can live today with boldness and courage—there is enough time and resources to do what God has given us to do.

When you put your faith in the Lord Jesus, your eyes are opened to the truth that He is with you everywhere you go—you are not alone, you are not unloved. When we face today with Jesus at our side, we don't need to be crippled by the fear of the unknown; our ultimate future has already been decided. And so, when it comes time to face

death, if Jesus is at our side, we close our eyes in this life, and we awake to discover that He has led us into a life without end.

The question is, *do you believe this?* Have you placed your life in Jesus' hands? Have you invited Him to forgive your sin and lead your life? Resurrection and Life are found in Him and no other—let me invite you to turn to Jesus today.

Many years after Jesus had ascended back into heaven, one of His disciples, Peter, wrote a letter to a church filled with people who had never seen Jesus firsthand. In this regard, they are very much like us. He wrote to encourage them as they followed Jesus and this is what he said: "*Though you have not seen [Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*"⁵

I love those words...**an inexpressible and glorious joy**. That's what Martha, Mary, and the crowd experienced when Lazarus came out of the tomb alive. That's what the disciples experienced when Jesus rose from the dead. And while my family and I are still waiting to see my mom again, we know that it's just a matter of time—resurrection is coming. As I think about seeing my mom, and more important by far, as I thinking about seeing Jesus face to face, I am filled with an **inexpressible and glorious joy**.

God is not finished with me, with you, or this world. Rescue is coming. Healing is coming. Transformation is coming. Because He

⁵ 1 Peter 1:8-9.

has risen, one day, we will rise too. Knowing this, we choose to live in joy. Amen.

Pray

Baptism

Worship

Benediction—“May the God of hope fill you with all **joy** and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁶

⁶ Romans 15:13.