

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 8, 2012  
Easter Sunday**

**TIME TO BELIEVE**

**John 11 (Selected Verses)**

I want you to go for a walk with me this morning – figuratively not literally – a walk in God’s Word as we look together at the account in the Gospel of John of the illness and death of a man named Lazarus, and of the demonstration of Jesus’ power over death in raising Lazarus from the dead. The story is told in chapter 11 of the Gospel of John. I invite you to turn to it in your Bible. I’m not going to read the entire Bible passage, but we’ll look at key verses as the story unfolds in John 11.

Here are a few things you should know:

- The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the last of seven miraculous messianic signs in the Gospel of John, signs pointing to the true identity of Jesus as God incarnate, God-with-us-in-flesh-and-blood, the true Messiah and King and Savior. This miracle foreshadowed the resurrection of Jesus Himself, which was soon to take place.
- The raising of Lazarus from the dead was also the last straw for the adversaries of Jesus, the religious leaders of Jerusalem, cementing their resolve to have Jesus arrested, tried for blasphemy, and put to death. They succeeded, as we know, and thought they had gotten rid of Jesus for good when He was put to death on a Roman cross and laid in a borrowed tomb. But things did not turn out the way the enemies of Jesus hoped.
- Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha lived in Bethany, a village just two miles east of Jerusalem. There was a mutual bond of deep affection between them and Jesus. Jesus was particularly fond of them, you might say. And they were particularly fond of Him. He had often stayed in their home when He came to Jerusalem.

Lazarus, we learn in verse 1, was sick. We don’t know the specifics of his illness, except that it was serious. So Martha and Mary sent a message to Jesus, who was with His disciples on the east side of the Jordan River. The sisters wanted Jesus to come – right away – and heal their brother. But Jesus wasn’t in a hurry. In fact, I don’t think Jesus was ever in a hurry. He knew how to redeem the time He had. He knew how to make the most of His time here on earth. Because He was smack-dab in the center of the Father’s will at every moment, Jesus didn’t have to be in a hurry. He knew the Father had given Him all the time He needed to complete His mission and accomplish our salvation.

When the messenger arrived with the news about Lazarus, Jesus stayed where He was for another two days. He delayed going to Bethany for two days. Why? Was it because Jesus didn’t care about Lazarus or his sisters? Was it because His plate was just too full? Because He was preoccupied with more important things? The answer is none of the above. When God delays in answering our requests and the pleas of our hearts, it is not because He doesn’t

care or is too busy. As James Boice said, God's delays are delays of love, not of indifference. He delays because He has something better for us, something better than what we have asked for, even if for a season we are not able to see it. Even if we are never able to see it or understand it this side of heaven.

In verse 4 we see that when He received word that Lazarus was ill, Jesus said: "This sickness will not end in death." Here's the thing: It *did* result in death. Death *did* take place. Lazarus *did* die. But his death would not be the end. Death would not be the final word. Jesus had another, higher purpose in mind. He would use the illness and death of Lazarus as an occasion to reveal the awesome glory and power of God – and the glory and power which were His own as God incarnate.

After two days, Jesus and His disciples left for Bethany. Let's pick up on the story in verse 17:

On His arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet Him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask" (11:17-22).

"If only you had been here..." Can you hear the disappointment, the complaint, in Martha's voice? "Lord, why didn't you come right away? What took you so long? If you had been here, my brother would still be alive." It is a combination of complaint *and confession* – a confession of Martha's trust in Jesus, her belief that Jesus had the power to heal her brother, her faith – incomplete as it was – that God would do whatever Jesus asked. Apparently, though, Martha's "whatever" did not include raising her brother from the dead. That is obvious from verse 39, where Martha objects when Jesus gives the instruction to remove the stone from the entrance to the tomb where the body of Lazarus had been placed. "But Lord," said Martha, "by now there is a bad odor..." By this time, she chided Jesus, the decaying body of Lazarus would stink, since he had already been there four days.

Continuing now in verse 23:

Jesus said to Martha: "Your brother will rise again."  
Martha answered: "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (11:23-24).

Martha affirmed her belief in a general resurrection "at the last day" – at the end of history, as did the Pharisees and most 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jews, in contrast to the party of the Sadducees, who were sad, you see, because they rejected belief in the resurrection and had no hope for life after death. But Jesus was not talking about the final resurrection at the end of history. He was talking about what He was going to do right then and there.

The reason Jesus could do what he was going to do is because He is who He is. Continuing in verses 25-26, Jesus said to Martha:

“I am the resurrection and the life. If you believe in me, you will live, even though you die; and those who are alive in me and have faith in me will never die.”

C. H. Dodd suggests this “I Am” statement by Jesus has applications in both the physical and spiritual realms. Applied to the realm of life in our physical bodies, Jesus says: “I am the resurrection.... If you believe in me, you will live, even though you die.” It is the promise of resurrection to life eternal after these mortal bodies of ours return to dust, the assurance that death does not have the last word.

Applied to the spiritual realm, Jesus says: “I am the life.... Whoever is alive in me and has faith in me will never die.”

Our bodies will die. Every one of us will experience death (unless Jesus comes back first). There are no exceptions. The Bible says: “It is appointed for everyone once to die” (Hebrews 9:28). It will happen to me. It will happen to you. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus said: “Against all other things it is possible to obtain security, but when it comes to death we human beings live in an unwallled city.” Ultimately, there is no defense against it. No way to avoid it.

You may have heard about the guys who were talking about death one day. One of them asked his friends: “What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?”

One friend said: “I would want people to say, ‘He was a great humanitarian who cared about his community.’”

The second replied: “I would want people to say, ‘He was a great husband and father, an example for many to follow.’”

The third friend gave it some thought and answered: “I would hope someone says, ‘Look! He’s moving!’”

Death is the destiny of every person. But it is not our final destiny. Our mortal bodies, which are eroding with time, will one day give out. Moses put it this way in Psalm 90:

The length of our days is seventy years,  
Or eighty, if we have the strength;  
Yet their span is filled with trouble and sorrow,  
For they quickly pass, and we fly away.  
(Psalm 90:10)

Our bodies will give out. But not our souls. Our souls will live on. Jesus says that if we are alive in Him spiritually, if we are spiritually alive through faith in Him, if we have put our trust and hope in Him for time and eternity, we will never be cut off from life in Him.

Jesus wanted Martha to see – and I believe He wants each of us today to see – that resurrection is not just a far-off future hope. In a spiritual sense it is a present reality, for everyone who trusts in Christ has been brought from death to life in Him. And Jesus wanted Martha to see, just as He wants each of us today to see, that He has the power to raise the dead right now. Right now!

Notice what Jesus says at the end of verse 26: “Martha, do you believe this?” This was not just a theological question. It was more than just a doctrinal question. It was a personal question. A question none of us can escape:

Do *you* believe this?  
Do *you* believe Jesus is who He says He is?  
Do *you* believe in His resurrection power?

Martha had not yet connected all the dots. But she affirmed what she had come to believe so far: “Yes, Lord,” she said. “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world” (11:27).

How about you? What do you believe? What do you believe about Jesus? Do you believe Him? We’ll come back to this in just a moment.

As the story continues in John 11, Martha went back to the house to tell her sister Mary that Jesus had come. Mary went out to see Jesus and fell at His feet, weeping in her grief. Jesus was deeply moved in His spirit and, in the shortest verse in the Bible, John says that “Jesus wept” (11:35). Another translation says that “Jesus burst into tears.” That is an indication of how much Jesus cares, how much He cares about us, about you and me, in the sorrows and sadness and heartache we experience in this life.

They went to the tomb where the body of Lazarus had been laid. Jesus gave the instruction to remove the stone that covered the entrance to the tomb and, as we noted earlier, Martha objected, because of the foul odor she was sure they would smell. But Jesus persisted, and the stone was taken away. After giving thanks to the Father in prayer, Jesus called to Lazarus: “Lazarus, come out!”

Know what happened? Verse 44: “The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.” The dead man came out – but he was no longer dead. We’re not talking here about a zombie. This is not a scene out of “Night of the Living Dead.” We’re talking about a man who had died but now had been made alive again by the power of God.

Today, of course, we celebrate the resurrection of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, who, in the words of the Creed, “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” though He had committed no crime, and “was crucified, dead, and buried... On the third day” – today, Sunday – “He rose again from the dead.”

There is an important difference between the raising of Lazarus and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Lazarus was restored to life only to die again. But Jesus is alive forever. He did not and will not ever taste death again. His resurrection on Easter morning is both the promise and the definitive proof that death does not have the last word. It is both the promise and the proof that Jesus is who He claimed to be. He is God-in-the-flesh. He is our all-sufficient Savior. His resurrection is both the promise and the proof that there is life after death – life *with* Him, life *in* Him, life that is offered and freely given to anyone and everyone who will trust in Him as Savior and Lord.

The question today is: Do you believe this? Do you? Really? Do you believe it in a way that actually affects the way you live? Or is it just something to which you say, “Yeah, I believe it,” and then you go on with your life as though it makes zero difference in your life?

Let me tell you about a man named Lew Wallace. You may have heard of him. Lew Wallace was born and raised in Indiana. As a young man, he served in the Army during the Mexican War, then returned home to Indiana, and became a lawyer and politician. He returned to active duty in the Civil War, rising to the rank of Brigadier General in the Union Army. After the war, he served in a number of government positions, including three years as Governor of the New Mexico Territory (before New Mexico was given statehood). He was also an author. In fact, he wrote the best-selling American novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, surpassing Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Wallace told how his book, which you have no doubt heard of, came about.

He had started out to write a book against Jesus Christ and in the process was converted to Christianity. He told a friend how it happened.

I had always been an agnostic and denied Christianity. Robert C. Ingersoll, a famous agnostic, was one of my most intimate friends. He once suggested, “See here, Wallace, you are a learned man and a thinker. Why don’t you gather material and write a book to prove the falsity concerning Jesus Christ, that no such man has ever lived, much less the author of the teachings found in the New Testament. Such a book would make you famous. It would be a masterpiece, and a way of putting an end to the foolishness about the so-called Christ.”

The thought made a deep impression on me, and we discussed the possibility of such a book. I went to Indianapolis, my home, and told my wife what I intended. She was a member of the Methodist Church and naturally did not like my plan. But I decided to do it and began to collect material in libraries here and in the old world. I gathered everything over that period in which Jesus Christ, according to legend, should have lived.

Several years were spent in this work. I had written nearly four chapters when it became clear to me that Jesus Christ was just as real a personality as Socrates, Plato, or Caesar. The conviction became a certainty. I knew that Jesus Christ had lived because of the facts connected with the period in which he lived.

I was in an uncomfortable position. I had begun to write a book to prove that Jesus Christ had never lived on earth. Now I was face to face with the fact the he was just as historic a personage as Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Virgil, Dante, and a host of other men who had lived in olden days. I asked myself candidly, “If he was a real person (and there was no doubt), was he not then also the Son of God and the Savior of the world?” Gradually the consciousness grew that, since Jesus Christ was a real person, he probably was the one he claimed to be.

I fell on my knees to pray for the first time in my life, and I asked God to reveal himself to me, forgive my sins, and help me to become a follower of Christ. Towards morning the light broke into my soul. I went into my bedroom, woke my wife, and told her that I had received Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

“O Lew,” she said, “I have prayed for this ever since you told me of your purpose to write this book, that you would find him while you wrote it!”

The name of the book he wrote? It was called *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. The 1959 film adaptation of the book, starring Charlton Heston, won eleven Academy Awards. The chariot race, which runs a full nine minutes in the movie, is one of the most famous scenes in the history of Hollywood. Though the face of Jesus never appears in the movie, both the book and the movie give a remarkable testimony to the life-giving and life-changing power of Jesus. And this, from a man set out to disprove that Jesus ever existed, only to be made alive himself by the grace of God – grace that is given free of charge to people who do not, will not, and cannot ever deserve it. People like Lew Wallace. And me. And you.

Friends, let me ask you today:

Do you believe?

Do you believe this?

Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life?

Do you believe in His resurrection from the dead?

Do you believe Him?

Is your belief more than just an intellectual assent to certain facts about Jesus?

We’ve been talking about time during the season of Lent:

Time to Seek the Lord  
Time to Love and Be Loved  
Time to Get the Spirit  
Time to Pray  
Time to Get Involved

The message today? It is time to believe. But I don’t mean “believe” just in the sense of giving intellectual assent to certain facts or propositions. Propositions will never save anyone. In fact, as the Bible reminds us, “even the demons believe” in this way (James 2:19).

It is time to believe in such a way that it transforms and revolutionizes the way you live. That is what true faith in Jesus does. It is not enough to agree with certain facts in your head. You've got to embrace it – you've got to embrace Jesus as your all-sufficient Savior and risen, living Lord – with your whole heart and let the truth of who He is work its way into every corner of your life.

It is time to believe. Time to believe in Jesus. Time to believe in His saving work and resurrection power in your life. Time to believe – and to live like a believer. Time to believe – and to live your life in a way that shows that you belong to Him.

Jesus is alive! Do you believe this? Do you believe Him? Are you alive in Him? Lord, let it be so. Let it be so in each of us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.