

**Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> January 2022**  
**I AM the Resurrection & the Life**  
**John 11:17-37**

We've been spending part of advent considering the I Am statements of Jesus in John's Gospel. His audience is similar to ours in the 21st Century, the majority of people didn't know who Jesus was. So, we have been taking some time to go back, and see how Jesus revealed His nature and His mission to the people around Him during His ministry.

The first I am statement by Jesus was "I Am the bread of life". This was followed by "I am the light of the world", then last week "I am the gate/door for the sheep", and then His fourth statement, "I am the good shepherd", which we will look at in the weeks ahead.

As we progress through these statements, we are getting closer and closer in the Gospel of John to the crucifixion of Jesus. This statement we are looking at this week actually took place during the resurrecting of Lazarus from the dead, which was the event that prompted the Sanhedrin to begin to plot Jesus' arrest and execution.

Like I said, for the audience present, these statements were the first time they had learned these things about Jesus. In this week's statement, we will see that Jesus gives resurrection and eternal life to anyone who believes in him. And then after saying this, he backs up his claim by raising

his good friend Lazarus from the dead. So, let's open with prayer, then we will look at this statement.

*v25-26 "Jesus said to her, "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. Do you believe this?"*

Jesus is in the midst of grief! Now we all realize grief is universal. As human beings we have all experienced grief. But we all do grief differently. Different cultures and religions and personalities, all process grief differently. This is especially true when it comes to dealing with death.

In my experience in dealing with death, I have noticed there is a whole spectrum of responses. Westerners in general are fairly reserved when it comes to grief. People have frequently apologized to me when tears come at a funeral. Half of my job has been to encourage people to let the tears flow.

In ancient Palestine, they were a little more expressive. The burial of a loved one would often happen on the day of death, followed by a funeral procession and a thirty-day mourning period which included lots of loud wailing and other dramatic displays of grief.

So, when it comes to grief, we're all different. Some are very expressive in emotions and others have a stiff upper lip. Some people have grown up being taught not to talk about

death or loss, or to ignore it, others are comfortable with the topic and might even joke about it. (But that can be offensive to others)

When we think of grief we often think of death, but grief can refer to any kind of loss.

Right now, I believe that we as a community, as a nation, and as a world we are experiencing a kind of collective grief. As Covid-19 has spread at great pace it has a profound impact on us.

### **The Collective Grief of Covid-19**

What are we grieving? For some it is the literal loss of life, loved ones who have died. For others it is the loss of security or a sense of control.

Perhaps it is isolation, and the grief of being cut off from familiar routines, and community. But we are experiencing grief in a collective way that the world hasn't seen in some time.

David Kessler, one of the world's foremost experts on grief, in a recent article by the Harvard Business Review said this: *"We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn't feel that way, and we realize things will be different. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11, things will change, and this is the point at which they changed. The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we're grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air."*

So, our grief is collective. We're experiencing this together and reacting in lots of different ways. Right now, for many of us there are two kinds of grief going on – a sense of loss for what was, and a kind of anticipation of what might be! Now we have all struggled with the inconsistencies of restrictions that governments have introduced, to prevent the spread of COVID and to keep us safe. But we need to be wise in our responses, and cautious in the attributing of blame. While it has been frustrating it is important to keep things in perspective. Compared to the rest of the world Australia has had it relatively easier than other nations – For us "Down under" on what could be referred to as the world's largest Island. Here are a few statistics to help us keep perspective and be a tad sympathetic to governments trying to manage this "Global Pandemic". (Slides)

In today's Gospel we get to see Jesus walk into the midst of a grieving family. This story from John speaks of grief and loss, and it shows us how Jesus responds.

### **CONTEXT**

Let me just take a moment to set the scene in terms of this passage in the context of John's Gospel.

In chapter 10 Jesus has made some big claims about who He is. Walking in the temple He gathers a crowd and speaks to them. The crowds say, *"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."* (John 10:24). Jesus says, *"I and the Father are one."* (John 10:30), and at this moment the crowds pick up stones to kill him because His claim is to be divine and they see this as

blasphemy. They attempt also to arrest him but we hear that Jesus escapes from their hands to Jordan.

It is here that Jesus hears of the illness of his friend Lazarus. Jesus seems to be in no hurry. He has a confidence about him, that could be misread as apathy. But this is not the case. Jesus says: *“This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”*

Most commentators are careful to point out here *that “it is not that the sickness occurred in order for God to be glorified, but rather that it constituted an occasion for God’s glory to be revealed.”* In other words, here is a moment where we are going to see Jesus reveal more clearly just who He is in the midst of a suffering world.

The raising of Lazarus is the culminating sign of John’s Gospel. It is the final and most compelling evidence of who Jesus is. It gives us an anticipation of Easter as Jesus walks into the midst of death and brings new life.

Given what has happened in chapter 10, we see that Jesus literally walks toward death – he walks to the death of Lazarus, yes, but also, he walks toward his own death, into the midst of danger as He journeys to Bethany just 3kms from Jerusalem, where attempts on his own life have just been made and where soon he will be crucified.

When Jesus arrives at Bethany, He enters a scene of grief and loss. Martha goes out to meet Jesus and Mary stays

home mourning. Both of them have a conversation with Jesus.

And both say: *“Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”* They reflect a common sentiment don’t they. “If only”

If only this had happened, we could have avoided tragedy. Jesus will face this same question at the cross – *“If you are the Son of God, save yourself...do something”*. And then Jesus faces the hard question, in v37 we hear *“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”*

This question reflects a well-worn tradition in the Jewish mind. The Psalms are full of crying out to God and complaint to God. They give space for lament and grief, bargaining, anger and complaint.

Psalm 13 says: *“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”*

Psalm 88 says: *“O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?”*

And there are more. The Bible gives room for people to cry out *“Where are you God?”* The Bible gives no simple answer to the cry of the suffering in terms of the “Why?” There are no pat answers. Yet what we see in the Gospel of John is that Jesus enters into the grief of Lazarus’ family. Jesus is present to it all.

Peppered throughout this story we see the compassion and deep feeling of Jesus

In v3 when Jesus gets the news we hear *“He whom you love is ill.”* v5 tells us that *“Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.”* In v33 when Jesus sees the people weeping, he is *“deeply disturbed in spirit.”* In v35, as he comes to the tomb *“Jesus began weeping.”*

What we see through this story is Jesus is present to the grief of Lazarus’ family.

Tom Wright puts it this way:

*“The Word, through whom the worlds were made, weeps like a baby at the grave of his friend. Only when we stop and ponder this will we understand the full mystery of John’s gospel. Only when we put away our high-and-dry pictures of who God is and replace them with pictures in which the Word who is God can cry with the world’s crying will we discover what the word ‘God’ really means”.*

I love that line, *“the Word who is God can cry with the world’s crying.”* I think it captures what is going on in this passage. In Isaiah 53 we hear words which have been applied by Christians to Jesus, which describe him as *“a man of suffering and acquainted with grief.”*

When Jesus finds himself amidst the grieving, he grieves with them.

Not only this, in v33 when we are told that Jesus was *“deeply moved”* and *“greatly troubled”* there is a sense of outrage and indignation in what he is feeling. The nature of Jesus’ tears is like when he weeps over Jerusalem.

As one commentator puts it:

*“The object of Jesus’ grief is not so much the death of his friend (whom he is about to raise) as it is the presence of death itself. Beyond this, Jesus, by weeping at the tomb of his friend, identifies with humanity by experiencing and participating in the grief of all whose loved ones have gone to the grave.”*

So, Jesus grieves, but he doesn’t stop there. Jesus prepares for action. As John Calvin put it: *“Christ does not come to the tomb as an idle spectator, but like a wrestler preparing for the contest.”*

Jesus comes to the tomb, asks that the stone be removed, much to the protest of Martha. And then, with a word Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Here we see a glimpse of Easter. Here we see hope. Though deeply distressed and genuinely entering into the pain of death, Jesus refuses to accept its finality.

Jesus can only say of Lazarus’ that *“this illness does not lead to death”* because he knows that death has no power over those who believe in him.

Earlier in John’s Gospel in chapter 6 we hear Jesus say this: *“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”*

The Christian faith is a hopeful one. It is a faith that says that death does not have the final say for all who believe and trust in Jesus. At the very centre of Christianity is the cross and resurrection. The cross is where Jesus enters into the grief and suffering of the world, he experiences the abandonment and depth of death. In the resurrection, Jesus breaks the power of death, it is no longer a full stop lingering over humanity, it is redefined in Him and He offers us life eternal.

In times of crisis, in times where things are topsy turvy and we feel the threat of death. In the midst of anxiety and fear we need to see both the cross and Jesus' resurrection clearly. The cross reminds us that Jesus is with us, that he grieves with us, that he enters into the pain of the world. The resurrection reminds us that our suffering is not without hope. Death does not have the final say.

If our theology is only that of the cross, we miss the hope and the joy of the Gospel. If our theology is only of resurrection then we can't understand suffering or make any sense of it, let alone be comfortable to sit with it. We need both – cross and resurrection.

So, as we reflect on the story of Lazarus today, we meet Jesus. He walks in the midst of a grieving family, and He walks with us in our grief. What is the invitation for us today? I find the apostle Paul's words helpful, in his second letter to the Corinthians:

## **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**

*"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God".*

We are invited to know the consolation and comfort of God today. And we are invited from that place to share it with others.

Much of the time, honestly, it does not feel like death has been defeated. Like Mary and Martha, we cry out in pain and ask our agonizing questions — about job loss, wayward children, financial crises, chronic illness, loss of loved ones, war and terrorism — whatever casts death's shadow across our lives.

Even as we cry out of the depths, however, we live and wait in hope. Like Martha and Mary, we learn that God does not act exactly when, where, or how we think God should act. But God will act in God's good time, and death will not have the final word. The day of resurrection will come – "Do you believe this?"

Prayer