

Signs: *The Dead Man*

John 11:1-53

As high priest, Caiaphas prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one (Jn 11:51-52).

Why Jesus Came and Died – *To bring God’s scattered children together and make them one.*

This was a rather shocking prophecy – both what the prophecy said as well as the one through whom the prophecy came. This prophecy that Caiaphas received in his role as high priest, was really quite remarkable because he and the religious leaders had waited their entire lives for Messiah to come – but they thought Messiah would restore only Israel to prominence – not to bring the “*Jewish nation as well as all the scattered children of God together*” and make us into one family. So, even though Caiaphas had been given the prophecy, he nonetheless made a commitment to keep it from actually being fulfilled.

You see, the leaders in Israel wanted Israel to be as great as they seemed to think it once was – back in the days of Abraham, and then Moses and then David – when, they thought, it’s just us in control of our land. They didn’t want these “other scattered children of God” to be in their family. But, when you read what the Bible says about those times they thought were great, they hadn’t been all that great.

To go back to those days was not the way to go. God is at work to give us a different kind of future. God’s eternal plan had always been to bring all people, each of whom is created in God’s image, back to him and to make us one. The prophecy God gave the high priest is that Jesus would die to bring that about.

This is Pentecost Sunday. At the first Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, God’s Holy Spirit came on people from every language group – with the clear implication that God was doing what Caiaphas had prophesied, i.e., to bring all who trust in Jesus to God, to bring us together and to make us one. And, this prophecy is still in process of being fulfilled all over the world. Indeed, it’s happening in our own church. In this service, we have identified that over 70 languages are spoken among those in this one church family here in Pasadena, CA.

However, the Bible is very clear that, for this prophecy of God to be completely fulfilled, there will be many battles that will have to be won in this broken and sin-filled world. The kingdoms of the world will rise up to fight the purposes of God. With that in mind, throughout this series on Jesus’s miracles, what John called signs, we’ve seen the effects of sin and fallenness in people’s lives: We saw the shame the two families in the marriage at Cana in Jn 2 would have experienced if Jesus had not stepped in. We saw the despair of a father with a terminally sick child in Jn 4. We saw the hopelessness of a lame man in Jn 5 and a blind man in Jn 9. We saw the hunger of the people out in the wilderness followed by the fear of the disciples in the boat in Jn 6.

But the greatest enemy of all in this fallen world is death. As I’ve said week after week, all the other signs that Jesus has performed have no lasting quality to them if death still comes to us and takes life away. With that in mind, the sign of a dead man being raised to life is not only the 7th and final sign in John’s Gospel, it is also the one to which all the other signs have been pointing. And, what happened in Jn 11 was the turning point in God’s mission to end all that is wrong and to bring us together in Christ. So, what was this turning point like?

D-Day, for Example

This past Thursday, June 6, 2019, we remembered the 75th anniversary of D-Day. On June 6, 1944 the Allied Forces of Britain, the United States, Canada, and France attacked German forces on the coast of Normandy, France. <http://diamant-ld.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Landing-Map-Great-D-Day-Beaches-Normandy-France-Map-768x501.jpg> With a huge force of over 150,000 soldiers, the Allies attacked and gained a victory that became the turning point for World War II. So, D-Day was not the final victory in the war – but it was the turning point. D-Day marked the start of a long and costly campaign to liberate north-west Europe from Nazi German occupation. Today, we have with us an active member of our congregation who was there, Bob Phillips.

Bob was a part of the Army Air Corp flying missions with the 8th Air Corp unit. He had flown 29 missions before the big one came, i.e., his involvement in D-Day. Bob was the gunner and radio operator flying in a B-17, i.e., “The Flying Cross”. <https://www.gannett-cdn.com/mm-/1e924285907382e0f8fbfa4904593fe88ee9488e/c=0-43-864-531/local/-/media/2017/06/12/AGroup/DesMoines/636328732977021733-Flying-Fortress.jpg?width=3200&height=1680&fit=crop> Their assignment was to drop bombs on bridges and railroads behind enemy lines to keep reinforcements from getting to Normandy Beach. The four-engine plane was damaged in the mission with only two engines functioning. Afterward, Bob was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his service.

I've often talked with military veterans from WW 2. They have always made several things clear to me:

- 1) **The enemy was evil and formidable** -- it had to be dealt with or evil would have grown;
- 2) **The battle could not be won without a personal invasion** -- of forces opposing the evil regime, and
- 3) **The victory at D-Day was the turning point in the war** -- but a lot of other battles were required before victory would be complete.

The Turning Point in John 11: Jesus Overtakes Death

I'm sure you can see how D-Day in WW 2 serves as an illustration of what we've read in Jn 11:

- 1) The enemy of death that has come into the world because of sin is evil and formidable. Sin is deeply entrenched in our personal lives and in the systems of this world.
- 2) The battle against sin and death could not be won without a personal invasion. Jesus came into this world -- experienced the trials and temptations of this world, even death itself -- in order to defeat them.
- 3) The victory of Jesus raising Lazarus in Jn 11 was the turning point in God's war against sin and death -- but there are still a lot of battles to be won before victory is complete.

John's Gospel is clear about the resurrection of Lazarus being the turning point in the battle. When the leaders of Israel realized that Jesus intended not to restore only Israel to prominence but to bring together all people, they became sure that Roman government would not accept the kind of uprising this would lead to. The leaders said, "*The Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation (11:48)*". High Priest Caiaphas said, "*It is better that one man die than that the whole nation perish (11:50)*". So, the dye is cast: In **Jn 11:53**, we read, "*From that day on they plotted to take his life.*"

So, Jesus came to fulfill God's mission to bring people from every people group to himself and make us one.

How Jesus Deals with People

In this long chapter, Jesus deals with a lot of different people. As he does, he seems to know each person's needs and issues. He does not have one formula that he uses each time he ministers to a person. We've seen that in each of the signs we've looked at over these past 7 weeks. I want you to see it in this episode too.

1. **The Disciples** -- *Jesus told the disciples, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe (11:14)."*

Jesus and the disciples received a message that Lazarus, a man Jesus loved, was terminally ill. But John makes it clear that Jesus chose not to go directly to intervene but dawdled for a couple of days before going.

What is it all about? Did Jesus want to make sure Lazarus was good and dead so there would be no confusing this resurrection with resuscitation? Or, was Jesus making the point that he is not like the ancient stories of genies in bottles that people can summon up any time we want to fix our problems? Or is he wanting to set a dramatic stage that will force the temple leaders to put him to death?

I think there is some truth to each of those possibilities. This is part of the amazing mystery of how God works. What Jesus does has many purposes and applications. But, **with regard to his own disciples, Jesus knew that waiting would serve to help them believe in him.**

You see, these disciples had seen so many things that Jesus had done. But, in spite of that, their faith was still weak. And, when in a few days, Jesus would be laid in a tomb, they may not yet believe that Jesus has power over the enemy of death. In this we see the patience of Jesus. He understands how weak our faith often is when uncertainties or trials come and, just as he did not give up on his disciples, he will not give up on us. It would have been wonderful for the disciples to have believed fully without seeing Lazarus raised. But, Jesus knew their weakness -- and loved them in spite of it. So he said to them, "*For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe (11:14).*"

2. **Martha** -- *Jesus said to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life (11:23f-25a)."*

When Jesus gets to Bethany, he first meets Martha and later her sister Mary. They both independently said the same thing to Jesus: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died (11:21, 32).*" Of the many

things I might say in a sermon about what Jesus said and did, today I simply want you to see how differently Jesus responded to this same comment from the women. It teaches us a lot of about how Jesus acts towards us.

In Martha's case, Jesus responded with a clear theological explanation. Martha already believed that God the Father would give Jesus whatever he asked (11:22). Martha already believed that God's people would be resurrected on the last day (11:24). So, Jesus put those two truths together and applied them to her situation. He told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this? (11:25-26)?"

And, that was enough for her. Notice Martha's immediate response: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world (11:27)."

3. **Mary** -- *Jesus wept* (11:35).

As is true in all our families, Mary and Martha, though sisters, were very different people and had very different needs. So, when Jesus entered into Mary's time of need, he did not begin with a theological explanation. No, he began with empathy. He felt the pain Mary was experiencing when her brother had died. He felt the agonizing sorrow of her loss. When Jesus saw Mary weeping, he wept too.

Here was Jesus weeping over the pain of one he loves. He loved the disciples, Martha and Mary too much to step in too soon – but he still wept because he knew his waiting would cause them pain. The most loving thing for Jesus to do was to allow their shorter-term suffering so that eternal suffering could be destroyed. But knowing that, Jesus nonetheless wept when he saw those he loved suffering. And, he still does.

So, we have many different persons and personalities represented in this one chapter. But, Jesus found a way to enter into each one and to address what they needed most at the time. I pray that you will experience that from him. There are times when, like Martha, you will have very serious intellectual questions – even profound doubts -- about what God is doing in the world or about what is revealed in the Bible. I want you to learn to bring them to Jesus. Know that he won't discard you because you have questions and doubts.

And, sometimes we just need someone to weep with us – not to instruct us or preach to us. In our pain, we often need to know someone cares enough to come be with us. Jesus does. No other religion speaks of a God who suffers with his people. But, Jesus weeps when you weep.

Of course, this says a lot about the kind of people we should be and the kind of church we should become – when we say Jesus is our Lord. I want us to be a church that is not put off by the hard questions that people often have as they seek to follow Jesus in the work place, or university, or unbelieving family. And, I also want us to be a church that learns to weep with those we love – even if their own foolishness and sin has caused the pain. If we have experienced Jesus weeping with us, we will weep when people we love suffer.

So, I long for us to be a church in which doubting people can bring their questions without fear – and suffering people can show their scars and wounds and know they will be met with gentleness – never passing over sin but never, never, never treating people rudely or coldly. And, of course, always offering the forgiveness and mercy and hope of this suffering Jesus who keeps offering us forgiveness, mercy and hope.

What Jesus Calls Us All to Do – *Jesus told his disciples, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe* (11:14). *Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live* (11:25).

You heard the story: Jesus moved from explaining to Martha and weeping with Mary. He went into action against the enemy. He did it in keeping with his timetable – as he always does. After four days in a tomb, he told Lazarus to come out of the grave -- and Lazarus came out! This is basis for our hope. We now know that Jesus did not simply have the power to come out of the grave himself – as he would soon demonstrate. Here we see he has the power to take people like Lazarus from death to life! That means he can do it for you too.

Our calling is to believe – to trust him even when we do not see what he's doing. Over and over again in this chapter, we read about dealing with each person personally – in keeping with their personalities and needs. But, **one thing is always the same, i.e., each one is called to believe in him.** Today, you too are called to believe in him, i.e., to trust him and follow him until you see the glory of God. Do you believe in Jesus in that way?

Let's not pass over this too quickly. Lazarus had been dead four days! Even Martha, after her strong confession of faith in v. 27, went to the tomb and said, "But Jesus, he's been in there four days! He'll stink!"

Lazarus wasn't just mostly dead (as Miracle Max said in *Princess Bride*) but really dead! So, once again, at the grave, Jesus declared, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God (11:40)?"

Would you have believed? This matter of belief challenges us in so many ways, doesn't it? Sometimes, we struggle with believing when, like the disciples, Jesus does not do the things that we think he should be doing. The disciples wondered, "Why is Jesus intentionally delaying when his friend is terminally sick?" They needed to learn to believe in Jesus and wait in faith when he didn't do what they thought he should do! Do you need to learn to believe like that about anything happening in your life today?

And, then they needed to learn to trust Jesus when he did things that they simply thought were impossible – like raising a man from the dead who had been in the grave four days. Would you have tried to explain Lazarus's resurrection away as a trick, maybe as the man having been in a coma instead of being really dead?

Let me tell you what happened to me a few years ago when I went to China. I was meeting with a group of pastors who were telling me of amazing ways that, using their words, "a man in white" had broken into their lives in a way that led them to believe in Jesus. One told me that this had happened while he was in prison for being a teacher. He said he had died in that prison and was pronounced dead. His memory was that, during the time he was deemed dead, a man in white met him, told him he would live and that he needed to find a Bible so that he could believe in Jesus. That man was sitting across from me. He seemed like a credible witness.

I confess to you that I found it hard to believe. I found myself explaining it rationally. And, there may have been a rational explanation. I know that. But, since that time, I have asked myself whether I truly believe that the Jesus who is in my life can do miracles. I've chosen to believe that the Jesus who raised the dead is present with me – that he never leaves or forsakes me. And, that, although I cannot often see what he is doing, that he is worthy of my trust. So, I also believe – that he is doing more than I see. I believe – that he can do more than I can ask or even imagine possible.

So Jesus asked Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life... Do you believe this?"

As I said before, the way the Gospel of John is told is that all other signs lead up to this one. This was the big sign, the sign that has to be true of we will have hope in this dying world. Listen carefully here. There are countless times in our lives when the things we experience feel like a death – lost relationships, lost income, lost health, etc.! When we lose any important thing or person, it feels like a death.

This sign points to the fact that Jesus is greater than even the greatest enemy in this world, i.e., physical death itself. It's often called the sign of Lazarus. But, I sometimes think that, of all the people in Jn 11, Lazarus may have been the one who had the most challenging calling. When Lazarus came out to the tomb in v. 44, he had to put his grave clothes back on. Lazarus had been raised but only to die again one day. I wonder if he ever wondered, "Did that really happen? Was I just dreaming that I died?" After this resurrection, Lazarus would have to live again by faith in this dying world knowing he would face physical death again.

So to him and his sisters – and to all of us who come after him, Jesus declares: I do what I do so that "whoever lives and believes in me will never die!" So, again, I must ask you the same question Jesus asked of Martha: *Do you believe this?*

*To him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!
Amen.*

Ephesians 3:20-21