

The I Ams of Jesus: The Resurrection and the Life

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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John 11:17-27

“On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.”

That’s a significant detail. Those four days are important. Because back then the Jews believed that when you died, your soul was separated from your body, but it didn’t completely leave your body for three days. They believed that for three days the soul hovered around the body hoping to re-enter. It wasn’t until the fourth day that the soul departed for good. So, you might say the Jews believed in two kinds of dead: there was dead, and then there was four days dead. At four days, grief went deeper. After four days you knew it was well and truly over. So when John tells us Lazarus has been dead four days, he’s reminding us that Jesus is coming to people who know it’s well and truly over. Their hopes aren’t just dead, they’re four days dead.

That’s a distinction I think we can understand. We know the difference between your hope being gone and your hopes being four days dead. Four days dead is when you’re not just unemployed and out of a job, but now your severance package has run out. Four days dead is when your spouse hasn’t just left you, but the divorce papers show up in your mailbox. Four days dead is when you come home and it’s not just a payment due notice stapled to the front of your house, there’s a repossession crew carrying stuff out of your front door and dumping it on the front lawn. You can feel the difference, right? Four days dead is when you realize that your hopes aren’t just broken; they’re totaled.

That’s the level of grief Jesus finds when he arrives in Bethany. You see it in the reaction of Mary to his coming. Mary and Martha asked him to come weeks ago when Lazarus was only sick and Jesus could have done something. Now they hear that Jesus is finally arriving. In the Middle East, ordinary rules of hospitality said that when you hear guests are coming, as the host, you should get up and go out to meet them, and then accompany them back to the house. Going out to meet your guest is simple, please-and-thank-you politeness. Check out Genesis 18 if you want an example of that. Abraham welcomes three guests, he rushes out to meet them as they approach, and when they leave he walks with them a little while to see them on their way. When Martha hears Jesus is coming, she does the ordinary, hospitable thing. She goes out to meet him. What does Mary do? She stays in the house. In the Greek it actually says, she sat in the house. She doesn’t even get out of her chair. That’s a reflection of her heart. Her hopes are four days dead.

What does Jesus have to say to people whose hopes are four days dead? Martha goes out to meet Jesus and even she can’t help but greet him with frustration. *“Lord if you had been here!”* She follows that up with something more polite and deferential. Jesus sees her pain and meets it with a strong word of hope: *“Your brother will rise again!”* Martha receives those words as a promise life after death. Many of the Jews believed in life after death. The Pharisees for instance all believed in a resurrection from the dead, although the Sadducees, another Jewish sect did not believe in it. So Martha receives Jesus’ words as the kind of thing everyone says at funerals and she responds in kind: *“I know he will rise again at the last day.”* But Jesus was not offering a typical word of funeral comfort, he wants to say something more profound and so he comes back at Martha with his great ‘I am’ statement. He says: *“I am the resurrection and the*

life. The person who believes in me will live even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

What is Jesus saying to Martha? Most of us think of this verse as a promise for the end of our life. I personally use this verse that way all the time. At the beginning of funerals I almost always begin by saying to the mourners, Jesus says, "*I am the resurrection and the life, the person who believe in me will live even though that person died!*" Why do I do that? I want the family to know that if their loved one died in Christ, they don't have to worry. Jesus will raise them up again and they will see their loved one again. That's a beautiful promise, and it's definitely part of what Jesus is trying to say to Martha here. But I don't think it's the main point of Jesus' saying. If Jesus is only telling Martha that believers will rise again on the last day, he's simply reinforcing what she already knows. But clearly, Jesus is trying to push Martha beyond what she already knows. He's trying to move her to a deeper understanding.

What's the deeper understanding? Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life!" And then, he follows that up with two clauses to explain what he means by this saying. In the first clause he says, "*The person who believes in me will live even though that person dies.*" That's the promise of the resurrection. In some ways, that first clause simply acknowledges what Martha has already said. "Yes. That's right Martha, your brother will rise again on the last day." The second clause is more challenging. In the second clause Jesus pushes Martha to see things more deeply. "*Whoever lives by believing in me will never die.*" That's different than the first clause. Jesus is saying a new thing. "Whoever lives by believing." Jesus is saying something about the regular days of our life. The first clause is a promise for our day of death. When you die you will have eternal life! The second clause is a promise for the regular days of our life. Eternal life is available to you right now. Clause 1: "Martha, I see you are disappointed about your brother. Don't worry. He will rise. Whoever believes in me will live even though they die." Clause 2: "Martha I see you are also wondering how to live every day without him. I see your hopes are dead. Here's my word for you. Whoever lives by believing in my will never die. Martha, my resurrection life is available to you right now. Live by believing in me and you can do this!"

The gospel of John talks a lot about eternal life. There are seventeen different times in this gospel where the phrase is used. Matthew uses the phrase only four times, Mark 2, Luke 3. John uses it 17 times. In John eternal life isn't just something you receive after you die, it's something that takes root in your life right now. In John, Jesus doesn't just talk about eternal life in the past; he talks about it in the present tense. John 3:36 - Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Present tense. John 5:24 - Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Present tense. John 6:54 - Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood *has* eternal life. Present tense. Eternal life is in you right now. Jesus says, "When you live believing in me, eternal life flows from the Father through me and into you." Live by believing in me. What does that look like? What does it look like to live by believing in him? To live by believing is to open your arms as wide as you can, let the eternal life of Jesus flow into you, and then turn and love and hope into the middle of situations that look four days dead. Sometimes that looks like doing really hard things. Way back in 2005, based on a program they saw working at Angola prison in Louisiana, some people at Calvin College and Calvin seminary started the Calvin prison initiative. They founded a satellite college and seminary on the premises of Handlon prison in nearby Ionia. Prisoners would be able to enroll in the college and the seminary and obtain degrees. Handlon prison is a four days dead kind of place. It is full of people who have

committed serious crimes and are serving long sentences, sentences that effectively take away the rest of their life. But a few people felt moved to sow love and hope in that four days dead place. Professors from the college and the seminary go into the prisons regularly and in that place and they sow love and hope in the form of learning. God is doing something through the Calvin prison initiative. Fourteen years later, the Handlon prison has changed. Many inmates are in the middle of degree programs. One of those students is a young man who was given a 30-60 year sentence. He talked about what the program meant to him. "I put my application in, answered a few essay questions, and then prayed about it. Two months later, I was on the phone with my mom when a corrections officer handed me a letter. I was nervous...but my mom told me to go ahead and do it. When I opened it my heart skipped a beat: I was accepted! My eyes filled with tears as my mom cried on the other end. She and my father told me something that I haven't heard from them in so long, 'I'm proud of you, son.'" But it's not just individual lives being changed; it's the whole culture. Warden DeWayne Burton told people that the year he started at Handlon there were 1200 violent incidents at the prison. Do you know how many there were last year? 8. I am the resurrection and the life. Eternal life is moving right now.

Sometimes to live by believing in Jesus look like a person who is joyful and resilient in the face of life's troubles. Sometimes it looks Mildred Koning. Mildred is one of the oldest members of LaGrave. 97 years old. She used to live in a condo up on Leonard and the Beltline, but just a couple of months ago she moved out to Muskegon to live with her daughter and son in law. I visited her the day before she went out to Muskegon. She was getting weak and her eyesight was terrible. I had to get really close to her before she could actually see who I was. I wish I could describe to you the joy of this visit. Mildred is radiant with hope and the love of Jesus. And it's not because she's had an easy life. Her parents divorced when she was 7. She and her Mother were converted at the Mel Trotter mission. She was baptized in Lake Michigan by Mr. Trotter himself. She's lost her husband years ago. She's lived through the death of a grandchild. She's known pain. But the pain hasn't crumpled her spirit or stifled her hope. Our conversation was full of mutual encouragement and genuine joy. At the end we prayer together. I started by praying for Mildred and she finished by praying for me, and when the visit was over I felt like I'd been drinking from a stream of living water. A week after my visit, she sent me a thank you note that she'd dictated to her daughter – she can't write anymore. In that note she thanked me, and she talked about her impending death. Here's what she said. "*My approaching change has ceased to be a shadow and has become a beam of light. The future remains obscure, but it has no darkness in it.*" That's eternal life in the present. What does it look like to live by believing in him? It looks like that.

I know that many of you are living in the face of hopes that feel not just dead, but four days dead. In the face of those things, Jesus promises to be with you, but he does more than that: he promises to give you the gift of eternal life, even in those dark places. He says, I am the resurrection and the life. The person who lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?

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