



John 11:17-27  
So That You May Believe: John  
“Real Hope”

Rev. Brian North  
September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022

It has often occurred to me that “hope” is kind of a funny thing. I mean, why do we have hope? **What gives us this idea to hope for some future reality that is better than our current situation?** I’m not the only one who wonders about this – psychologists and researchers actually study “hope” and our reasons for having hope. But it seems to be that hope for the future actually comes from the past. Particularly, from past experiences – either our own, or someone else’s.

My kids, for example, keep hoping that we will take them to Hawaii. That hope is not based on their past experience, because they’ve never been. It’s based on other people’s experience – like the fact that I went to Hawaii with my family when I was in Middle School, and that Gwen and I have managed to go there three times in our marriage, and that many of my kids’ friends have been to Hawaii – some of them multiple times. And so, all of this plants the idea in their head that maybe someday we will take them. So, they hope for that. With 6 of us, and a 7<sup>th</sup> with the adoption, it’s not likely to come to fruition...but they can keep hoping, right?

Fans of sports teams hope for making the playoffs and winning a championship...because *someone* has to make the playoffs and someone has win it, right? Again, that’s what history tells us – whether that team itself has done so, or not. When a music group breaks up, fans of that group hope for a reunion of the band – again, because it has happened at other times – like the Backstreet Boys and the Spicegirls. Sorry...I couldn’t find any actually *good* bands who had reunited. 😊 But the point is: **History leads us to have hope for the future.**

In the passage we’re about to read, we see hope expressed by some of the people in it, and Jesus has some things to say that give hope for the future. Now, before we begin reading, let me set the stage in case you missed last week: Lazarus is a friend of Jesus’ and is the brother of two sisters who are also his friends – Mary and Martha. They got word to Jesus that Lazarus is seriously ill, with the implied request for him to come and visit. But Jesus

waits a couple of days before going, and in that time Lazarus dies. So, let's pick up John's narration of these events in John 11:17, going to verse 21 for the moment. **(John 11:17-21).**

**So: By the time Jesus gets to the area, Lazarus has been dead four days.** And in that day, after a death the body was buried very quickly, often on the same day that the person died. Quite frankly, it was just a matter of practicality and necessity, given the warm climate and the lack of refrigeration capabilities.

The other thing that was very common in that day was for friends and family to come and be with the immediate family of the deceased. Lots of people would show up – and they would be with them for a few days. Maybe in our day, immediate family would stay together for a few days...but other relatives and friends are with us for, what, a few hours maybe, at a memorial service and reception? Maybe a few of them make an extra effort to stop by our home to visit with us for an hour? Their sense of community and being with one another in times of grief is much greater. So, when Jesus comes to Mary and Martha, there are many people already with them, as was their custom.

Then we read that **Martha went out and met Jesus before he got to their house, while Mary stayed at home (John 11:20).** The other famous story that we have involving Mary and Martha is recorded in the gospel according to Luke. In that story it is again Martha who is action oriented. She's the one who stays in the kitchen cooking up a storm, while Mary sits at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching. Martha is again action oriented in today's passage– but this time, her actions lead her *to* Jesus. She goes out to him, while Mary stays back.

What she says to him is something we can all relate to: **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21).** How many times have we said something similar to somebody? (And probably *wanted* to say it even more times.) We've *thought* it a lot! Maybe we said it to God, maybe to a family member or a close friend...“Why didn't you get here sooner?...Where were you?...What took you so long? Why didn't you help

when I asked?” These are the kinds of things we say when someone doesn't meet our expectations...when our hopes are unfulfilled. And we see that happening here as she expresses her disappointment. So, things start off with an expression of the opposite of hope – despair and a hope that has been dashed.

But then she says something that is pretty astounding, especially if you don't know much about Jesus. Let's continue on in **verses 22-24**. So, as you can see, even though she's just made a statement of a hope dashed, she has not lost all hope. **She has a hope for something, but it's almost like she doesn't dare to say what it is she's hoping for.** “Whatever you ask for, Jesus, I know God will give it to you.” Clearly, she's seen and heard about Jesus' ministry – other miracles such as those we've seen here in John, or that the other biographies of Jesus tell us about. But she's also leaving it in his hands. There's faith here. She trusts him. She has hope based on Jesus' ministry, that something good can happen in the future. She's not going to try and control him and tell him what he ought to do...but clearly, she has hope for something because of who Jesus is.

In response to Jesus saying Lazarus will rise again, she clearly presumes Jesus means an end time resurrection for all those who are faithful to God – which is a second statement of faith and trust that she makes here. It's a hope that she has, based on the promises of God. Now, that's different than hoping Jesus might do something right there in the moment, but it is a hope that she has, and while it's may be difficult to know for sure how Jesus' words to her impacted her, there's a bit of a sense that this brings some comfort to her. She knows her brother will rise again, in the last days. So, she's not thinking that Lazarus is going to be sitting at the dinner table that night. But she shows this incredible ability to trust Jesus no matter what the circumstances are.

Let's see what happens next (**John 11:25-27**). Let's start with Jesus' statement in verse 25. **“I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25a).”** It's a completely stunning and out of the box claim to make, unless you're familiar with other claims that Jesus makes along these lines. This is another one of Jesus' famous “I am” statements in the Gospel of John. And once again, through this statement, Jesus is revealing who he is. He's not just a mere human being like every other human who's ever been conceived. He

has origins from somewhere else. We've already seen this at the end of John 10 when Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" and some of the audience tried to kill him because they understood Jesus to be saying that he is God.

And it's the same thing here. **For Jesus to say that he is "the resurrection" is another claim to divinity.** God extends resurrection to those who trust him and seek to live in relationship with him – that was the Jewish way of thinking, as it is for Christianity, which grows out of Judaism. God is the author of life and life eternal. But Jesus takes it even further and says that he *is* the resurrection. It's not just that he makes resurrection possible, or offers it to others, which he does; but it's what he *is*. It's a part of the very fabric of his being.

And so, it's a claim to being something more than meets the eye, to being more than human, to being more than mere flesh and bones, to being more than a wise, kind, and good teacher as some people think of Jesus. In fact, Jesus doesn't leave room for thinking of him as just a kind, good, ethical, wise teacher. A person can't say "I am the resurrection and the life" unless it really is true, because the claim is then a lie – which is not ethical, wise, kind, or good. So, either he is who he claims to be, or Jesus is on the same level as a mad man who says he's a poached egg – we can thank C.S. Lewis for that line. Jesus claims that he *is* the resurrection and the life.

Then he continues on to say, **"Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25b-26).** Then, and remember her brother has just died a few days ago, he asks Martha, "do you believe this?" And she says "Yes."

So, what is Jesus saying, and how can Martha believe it when Lazarus is there in the tomb? And we all know that there are Christians all over the world who die every day. They believe in Jesus, but clearly, they don't "never die." So, what is Jesus referencing? Well, the problem with understanding this is that we are too focused on the physical body and this world. What a surprise, right? Imagine that! We are too focused on what we can grasp with our five earthly senses. But with Jesus, there's more than meets the eye. Here's how to understand what he's saying: **"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though their**

**body dies, they will have spiritual life; and everyone who embraces that spiritual life now and believes in me will never spiritually die.”**

In other words, life is more than meets the eye. There’s a spiritual component to it that we can experience now through believing in Jesus Christ – and that facet of life will not die when our bodies do. Our problem, consistently, is that we are too focused on the physical. We think this is all there is. Our body, this earth, this solar system, this galaxy, this universe... Jesus is saying that there is so much more than even all of that – and the Universe is ginormous – Jesus offers life beyond all of that, and you can experience that when you believe in him.

That’s what gives Martha hope right here in this conversation. She has hope for the future, even as her brother lays there in the tomb. It’s what gives us hope in this life and for life after death. These words of Jesus’ and other statements that he makes about himself and the impact of trusting in him give us hope. The miracles that he worked – from multiplying food to healing the blind – these things lend credibility to his teachings. As we saw a couple weeks ago, even those who opposed him understood him to claim that he was God come to them in the flesh. They didn’t *believe* it, but that’s what they understood him to be teaching. And that gives credibility to his claims about what he offers to those who believe in him. And what he offers is real life, life as God intended it, here and now, and also beyond this life, beyond this world.

I want to share a quote that I’ve shared with you before that I think is pertinent to share again: **“Since Jesus is the resurrection and the life, Christian existence in Christ is life before death!...and since [this life] is life in union with the Lord who conquered death, death cannot touch it” (George Beasley-Murray, Word Biblical Commentary, John, p. 201).**

I love those three words, “life before death.” It’s a nice turn on the words we usually speak - “life after death.” And in those words, and in what Jesus is saying, we see that when we are living in a true relationship with Jesus now, this “life before death” is a spiritual vitality, a spiritual reality that we experience not only after death, but also here and now. So, the irony is that if we get our minds off of the here and now, and live with a perspective that life

is more than meets the eye...that the universe is not all there is...that belief in Jesus leads to eternal life...and if we allow that belief to be the driver of who we are and what we do...the irony is that our experience of this life will actually be better and fuller and richer. It will be more complete, and be more as God intends. All of this together is the Good News of Jesus Christ!

I'm reminded of something I read several years ago. I can't remember who said this...but it was based on this saying that "you only live once." And so what I remember coming across was this person saying that really, that isn't true. You actually only *die* once (well, with rare exception for people who die and are resuscitated) ...but you get the point. You only die once. But each day you wake up is a new opportunity to live. Yes, it's all one life, but each day is a new day to live the life God intends. It's an opportunity to live in relationship with your Creator, to live, as the band Switchfoot puts it in one of their songs...to live "as you were meant to live"...which is "more than this world has to offer."<sup>1</sup> To live as God meant for you to live is to find your life in Him, in Jesus.

And so, when Jesus says he is the resurrection and the life, that's what it means. In this moment he has with Martha, it gives her hope right here, even with Lazarus in the tomb. As Jesus did with Martha, he stands before you, and in the midst of pain and loss in your life – whether that describes you right now or it's coming somewhere further down the road – and he asks: **"Do you believe this?" – Jesus.** I don't know what facet of your life you hope for something different and better for the future: Health, finances, housing, relationships, job...or maybe life just feels bleak and you're struggling to find hope. Know this: Jesus offers real hope, because of who he is.

He is the great I Am, who spoke Creation into being, who walked the face of the earth...He is the resurrection and the life, and He invites you to believe in Him and to find real hope – in the life to come, and in this life – to find that in him. If, as I started this message with...if it's true that hope for the future is grounded in what has happened in the past – to ourselves or to others – then what exactly is it that gives us such hope? What have Christians experienced? The answer is Jesus: Who he is, what he says, and what he has

done. We'll look at that even more next week in the last part of this mini-series on John 11, when he gives Mary and Martha and others – now including us – good reason to find real hope in him.

But for now, let's recognize Jesus' claim that he is "the resurrection and the life." I invite you, like Martha does here, to allow that statement to give us hope in the midst of whatever we're facing. Wherever resurrection and abundant life are needed, Jesus can bring it, and we can experience it here and now when we're centered on him. Let's live with that hope this week and beyond. Let's pray...Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Meant To Live" by Switchfoot.