

# THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

SERIES: I AM: GETTING TO KNOW JESUS



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John 11:1-27

Fifth Message

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*John 11:1-27*

This planet is teeming with life.

Biologists say that “a single teaspoon of soil can hold up to one billion bacteria, several yards of fungal filaments, several thousand protozoa, and scores of nematodes.”<sup>1</sup> Think about that for a moment. A single bacteria is a living creature. If there are one billion in a teaspoon of dirt, then a handful has more bacterial life than the human population on earth.

The staff spent a few nights on a retreat at Bar SZ Ranch near Paicines this past week. A ranch is full of life—birds, gophers, rabbits, insects, bunnies, cows, chickens, cats, dogs, horses, butterflies, and so much more. Mornings were so loud, with everything awakening and making noise. It is such a beautiful noise.

Life is amazing because it sustains itself. A living organism is a complicated set of processes that function and run on its own. Right now, your body is hard at work. Your eyes and brain are processing visual data. Hair is growing. The last thing you ate is travelling through 25 feet of intestine. White blood cells are fighting germs. Glucose is metabolized. Cells are created. Tissue is repaired. Life is always at work.

Until it isn't. One of the most fundamental truths about life is that at some point, it stops. Life ends. And unlike your phone, car, or dishwasher, when life shuts down, it never starts up again. Life ends in death.

The billions of bacteria in this dirt will stop. Every living organism on the ranch will eventually cease functioning. Each and every one of our bodies will quit doing its work. You and I will die.

Life is amazing. Death is a tragedy, but it is unavoidable. One of the most important parts of life is figuring out how to deal with the reality of death.

For the past few weeks, we've been in a series called “I AM,” looking at seven statements that Jesus made about himself. He uses very simple everyday images to

communicate something powerful about his identity in most of these.

We have seen Jesus describe himself as bread, light, a door, and a shepherd. He has covered the most well-known food, a common architectural element, and a primary job occupation. But now, he starts to go a bit deeper. This week and next week, we will see him use more abstract ideas to define himself. But they are also more universal and philosophical. Today we will explore what Jesus means when he says, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

In these simple words, Jesus offers an approach to life that is completely unique. He addresses our most basic and ever-present fear: the fear of death.

The past several years have seen our entire planet held captive by a virus. That virus has led to a massive amount of death: over six million people worldwide as of today.<sup>2</sup> The virus has also led to devastating degrees of disruption to life—relationships, education, the workplace, and mental health. Life is not the same after COVID-19. Death and the fear of death have dramatically transformed our world in the past two years.

To paraphrase the apostle Paul in Romans 7, who will save us from death?

Jesus has an answer. He makes a sweeping statement that puts himself squarely at the center of everything related to life and death.

He doesn't just say something; he does something too. As with all of these statements, they occur in context. Most of them happen in the midst of a story. There is a tight connection between the events described and the words Jesus uses to explain himself. In this case, the story surrounding this declaration is one of the longest narratives in the book of John and the most remarkable of his many miracles. Jesus' good friend Lazarus has been lying in the grave for four days. His life had stopped. But Jesus will do what no one else can do. He will bring Lazarus back to life.

The words explain the story for some of the “I am” statements we’ve read. Jesus fed 5000 people and then claimed to be the bread of life. But in this case, Jesus claims something about himself—“I am the resurrection and the life”—and then he does something. The story of raising Lazarus from the dead explains the words. And, of course, for any of the readers of these words, the upcoming crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus himself looms large.

Jesus also asks a question. He does something, he says something, and he asks a question. All three of those elements weave together to help us get to know who Jesus is.

We will look at each in turn: the story, the statement, and the question. By the end, we will understand how Jesus is the source of life and the solution to death.

## The story

Let’s begin by getting the setting for our story.

### John 11:1-2 and 5:

**Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.**

**Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.**

The events have to do with three siblings: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They were probably adults, mostly like married with families of their own. They lived in a village called Bethany, a little less than two miles away from Jerusalem.

This was a special family to Jesus. No one else in all the gospels is described by saying that Jesus loved them. The village of Bethany was his home base near Jerusalem, in the same way that the village of Capernaum was his home base when he was in Galilee. His relationship with these three people was deep and meaningful.

That is why the next development in the story was so shocking.

### John 11:6:

**So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.**

Imagine this scene. Jesus is at least a day’s walk away from Bethany. Messengers come and tell him that one of his closest friends is ill. He thanks them for the information and goes about his business. How would you feel?

Based on Jesus’ actions, we could conclude one of two things. Either he is insensitive and uncaring. Or he knows something about life and death that we don’t quite understand. We have to read further to decide which it is.

What is immediately clear is that Jesus doesn’t feel the same urgency as the people around him.

We live in what contemporary sociologists call an “Urgency Culture.” Everything around us comes at us with high importance. Nothing is a low priority. When my phone beeps, there is an unstated expectation that I check it right away and respond as soon as I can.

Listen to one author reflect on our culture:

*This phenomenon is one I call “hallucinated urgency,” which causes us to constantly and thoughtlessly race through the day and interrupt our colleagues. ... This barrage of urgency will kill any deep work we attempt, and we tell ourselves we have no choice. ... There is one small action you can take that will pop the bubble of urgency and snap you back to lucidity: Take a strategic pause.<sup>3</sup>*

Isn’t it fascinating to watch our contemporary culture “discover” principles God has been teaching, living, and encouraging for thousands of years?

This is exactly what Jesus does. He takes a strategic pause and explains why.

### John 11:4:

**But when Jesus heard it he said, “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.”**

God has purposes which transcend the urgency that we feel. If we get nothing else from these words and this

story, this simple idea can set us free. The urgency we feel most of the time is not in line with God's timing. There is a difference between important and urgent. Even important tasks don't need to result in a frenzied panic of urgency.

As the story continues, we see that the illness Lazarus faced had probably already taken his life. Jesus does decide to go to Bethany. When he gets there, he would have encountered a scene of great mourning.

#### John 11:17-19:

**Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.**

It is hard for us to imagine the scene that Jesus would have found in Bethany. A first-century Jewish funeral would last for around seven days. It would involve periods of loud wailing. People would come from surrounding villages to join in the wailing and pay proper respect to the dead. The whole village would be loud and chaotic and grief-stricken.

This is the scene that Jesus walks into. This is the context for his incredible statement. And it is a reality that resonates with many of us. The simple truth is this: death is a tragedy no matter the situation. Death is always a tragedy. When someone passes away, you want to do something—anything—to express the deep grief that you feel.

Several of you have lost loved ones—some very recently. We have a new appreciation of how fragile life is because of the pandemic. We also have a new understanding of how fragile our way of life is—the simple rhythms of interaction and functioning in our world.

Take a moment to consider someone you know who has died. Maybe it was someone close to you. Perhaps it was recently. Whom have you lost?

We mostly manage to separate ourselves from death and grief in our culture. But Jesus walks right into a community loudly mourning the death of one of their own. Into this village of grief, Jesus meets his dear friend Martha. And he describes himself in a radical way.

## The statement

Jesus makes a statement with two parts in parallel. Each part of his statement is first summarized and then explained in more detail. While the meanings overlap, they have a different emphasis that's helpful for us to recognize.

#### John 11:25-26:

**Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"**

Here's another way to see the parallel in this statement:

I am	
the <b>resurrection</b>	and the <b>life</b>
whoever believes in me, though he <b>die</b> , yet shall he <b>live</b> ,	everyone who <b>lives</b> and believes in me shall never <b>die</b> .

You can see how these two words are related. Jesus says he is the resurrection means that if you die, you will live again. Jesus saying he is the life means that if you are alive, you will never die. In one simple statement, Jesus addresses those who have died and those who fear death. Everything is covered.

Let's look at each of these words and ideas one at a time.

First, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection." We have to understand what this word meant in the first century if we are going to grasp the full impact of this statement.

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had developed an expectation of what would happen after death. They believed that a day would come when everyone—dead and alive—would face ultimate judgment. All the injustice of this world would finally be set right. The good judge would bring perfect judgment.

This explains why Martha's immediate response to Jesus telling her "your brother will rise again" is to say,

"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Something will happen far in the future that will make me feel better.

I think that's how a lot of people view religion in general. Religion deals with abstract principles—justice and love, and mercy. Religion helps us face injustice and softens our anxieties. One of the most famous atheists of the 20th century, Sigmund Freud, put it this way:

*[Religious ideas] are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes.<sup>4</sup>*

Freud says that religion helps us handle the difficulties of life by creating an expectation of a future life where all of our hopes can be realized. That hopeful illusion numbs us to the pain of today and helps us to cope.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus walks into a wailing village of grief and upends that expectation. He doesn't say, "I will bring the resurrection." Nor does he say, "I will cause people to be resurrected." Instead, he says, "I am the resurrection." It is me. The resurrection is me.

Jesus doesn't say that the resurrection will happen in the future. He says that it is now. "I am"—present tense—"the resurrection."

Jesus takes what for Martha is a far-off, abstract concept that gives her some level of comfort in life, and he redefines it. You think you believe in the resurrection, but I'm here to tell you that it is me, and it is now.

This is often the biggest challenge for us who have some notion of faith. Maybe we believe in Jesus. Or maybe you're still exploring faith. But in any case, it can feel like a far-off abstract idea that doesn't really change much come Monday morning.

Then Jesus shows up and says, "it is me," and "it is now." Faith in Jesus is all about the day-to-day of our lives, which is exactly why he goes to the second part of his statement.

In the next part of his phrase, Jesus says, "I am the life."

In the first part of his statement, Jesus addresses those who have died: "I am the resurrection." The miracle he is about to perform of raising Lazarus from the dead will prove that point. And by proving the first point, that

miracle also attests to the truth of the second point. Not only can Jesus raise people from the dead, but he can also keep them from dying.

Jesus says, "I am the life."

Think again about all the life in this cup of dirt I am holding. Think about all the life I told you about at the ranch. Think about all the life in this room and outside: the trees, birds, insects, and flowers. This planet is teeming with life.

If even a single cell of living matter was discovered on the surface of Mars, can you imagine the reaction? One bacteria. I have trillions in this cup, but if we discover one on Mars, it would be the most significant discovery in history.

Jesus claims that all this life is because of him. His words mean that he is the process by which all life continues to function. When God created man in Genesis, he breathed the breath of life in him. In Colossians, the apostle Paul says that "all things hold together" in Jesus. Jesus is at the core of every living process.

I've been reading a new fantasy novel with a character described in a similar way. One of the characters is a Creator King. Listen to how he explains a village he created:

*Look around this place. See the complexity of everything I've made. The water system, the structures, the life forms, each of them unique yet part of a complex network. I've poured my mind and soul into everything that I've made. If I were to withdraw my creative spark from any of my created beings, they would cease to exist, but I sustain them every moment so that they can experience life.<sup>6</sup>*

This is Jesus. The essence of our God is life. In Genesis, we read that God "formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." Other parts of the Bible make it clear that Jesus was there at creation. By giving his creation life, God gave his creation his very essence. Life is the essence of God.

I hope you can see that about Jesus. The gospel is so much bigger than "believe in Jesus, and you'll go to heaven when you die." Jesus is at the center of life itself. Which means he should be at the center of our lives. And that's where he goes next. Jesus says this amazing statement, and then he asks Martha to make a choice.



## The question

Jesus offers Martha the opportunity to decide for herself what she thinks about this idea.

**John 11:26b-27:**

**“Do you believe this?” 27 She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”**

Jesus asks her if she believes that he is the resurrection and the life. She answers, “yes”, but the content of her answer is interesting. Within the gospel of John, it is the clearest articulation of who Jesus is up to this point. She says, “you are the Christ.” But there’s still something about her response that seems like she doesn’t quite understand what Jesus had said.

One commentator said: “Martha said yes when undoubtedly the implications of this “yes” are beyond her comprehension.”<sup>6</sup>

To put it plainly, Martha has a certain kind of faith that’s appropriate for where she is at in her life.

That should be both an encouragement and a challenge to us. How would you answer if Jesus turned to you in a moment of quiet and asked, “Do you believe this?” Do you believe this?

My experience of faith is that it is a relationship that grows and changes over time. As a young child, I learned the stories and ideas about the Bible, and I believed. In my adolescence, I saw a community of high school students live this out, and Jesus became real to me in a new way. In college, I walked with Jesus through issues of sin and saw how Jesus cared for me, even in my hypocrisy. As an adult, I’ve seen my faith be transformed through seasons of parenting, marriage challenges, anxiety, learning to lead, and seeing God’s provision.

In each step, my answer to the question “do you believe?” would be the same. But the content of my faith, while always centered on Jesus, would be slightly different.

This should be an encouragement because any amount of faith is real faith. If you can say any kind of a “yes” to Jesus, you have put your faith in Jesus. Along with the man in Mark 9, you can say, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”

This should also be a challenge for us because there is always somewhere deeper to grow, no matter where you are. Our relationship with God is not a static thing. Like any relationship, it takes on different shades of color in different seasons. God never changes, but our relationship with him never stays the same.

Remember how I said that the story explains the words for this statement? Think about when Jesus asked this question of Martha. The village is still erupting in mourning. The sound of wailing still fills the streets. Martha has met Jesus outside of town, and they are talking. He has told her that he is the resurrection and the life and asked whether she believes. She says, “yes.”

In the middle of her mourning, she says, “yes.” While Lazarus still lies in the grave, she says, “yes.” Knowing that Jesus waited two days to come to Bethany to see her, she says, “yes.” With all of her pain and grief and probably a bit of anger, she says, “yes.”

Her faith happened in the middle of all the messiness of life. That’s when she believed.

And then Jesus walked over to the grave and called Lazarus out of it. Martha believed that Jesus was the resurrection while Lazarus lay in the grave. And then she saw that he was the resurrection when he called her only brother back to life.

This is often how faith works. You might say that you need to see to believe. But often, with faith, you have to believe in order to see. You have to believe to see.

What are you facing in your life which requires more faith? What is the challenge that you cannot seem to get past? Believe in Jesus and wait to see him demonstrate that he is the resurrection and the life.

## Conclusion

Eventually, all the life in the cup of dirt will die. Billions—maybe even trillions—of bacteria will stop doing whatever bacteria do when they are alive. Death will take them.

But 2000 years ago, a man walked the earth who claimed to be the author and sustainer of life. And then he proved it by defeating death. He rose from the dead. When you put your faith in Jesus for the first time or grow your faith in a new way, you have a connection to that life. Jesus solves death for those who are dead, and he solves the fear of death for those who are alive.

If this does not describe you, this is a great day to embrace faith in Christ. You can forever be free from the fear of death. But not just that, you can live. You can be connected to the source that powers all life in the universe. Your life can flow out from his life.

If you already believe in Jesus, what is your next step in faith? What does it look like for you to be intimately connected to the source of life?

## Endnotes

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