

August 17, 2025

The Gospel of John
“He Was Deeply Moved”
John 11:1-44

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When you’re a kid, you can watch the same movie 100 times and never get tired of it. And for me and my brother, a movie called *The Sandlot* was one such film. It’s about a group of young kids who spend their summer playing baseball at the neighborhood sandlot. And to make a long story short, they end up meeting an old, blind baseball player played by James Earl Jones. And his iconic line from the movie is that “Heroes are remembered, but legends never die.” Heroes are remembered, but legends never die. To my adolescent mind, that sentence meant one thing: if you’re a good enough baseball player, you’ll live forever. Unfortunately for me, I was not a very good baseball player.

There’s a classic book written in 1973 by Ernest Becker entitled, “The Denial of Death.” And in it, he talks about the fact that we human beings live our entire lives in fear of death. Unspoken, unacknowledged, but powerfully motivating fear of death. We build ourselves up by our choices. We make ourselves the heroes of our own story in a vain attempt to cheat death. He says,

“It doesn’t matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value... They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a sky scraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive and outshine death and decay, and man and his products count.”¹

Maybe this rings true for you. It certainly does for me. Baseball is not the thing to which I’ve devoted my hero-story, but I’ve certainly tried to do it in other ways. I’ve tried to carve out my position in the world. I’ve tried to establish my legacy. And if Becker is correct, then I suppose I’ve tried to do it for only one reason: because ultimately, I’m afraid of dying. I’m afraid of that day when I won’t be around anymore.

That’s understandable, I think. I can agree with Becker’s hypothesis. We try to protect ourselves from death almost instinctively. Because it is terrible. It is sorrowful. There is no good thing about it. Death takes from us what we hold dear. It takes and it takes and it takes, and while we do our best to avoid it or postpone it or ignore it, the stark reality of life in this world is that death remains.

I’m offended by that fact. It offends the very purpose of our lives, doesn’t it? My heart beats quicker when I talk about death because I hate the reality of it. I hate the fact that it’s true. I

¹ [Architects, Madmen and Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death - Mockingbird](#)

hate that it has taken so much from me already. I hate that it will take so much more. I grieve sometimes knowing that death exists at all.

Why? Why is death part of being human? Why does it have to be like this? Why is life punctuated with such sorrow? These questions come to us a lot, don't they? Sometimes they creep into our thoughts when we least expect them. Our distractions can't keep them away, and we become afraid. What are we to do? Where are we supposed to say in the face of these things?

Maybe we don't have anything to say. But that doesn't mean that death gets the final word. Because, as our scripture for this morning promises, God has something to say about it. God in Christ has a word to speak over death. A word louder than any distraction we might construct... A word of command over death itself. And his word is life!

All throughout our study of the Gospel of John, we've returned again and again to this theme of abundant life. Bill calls it Capital Letter L Life. Eternal and abundant Life in Christ. Not the kind of life that we earn from our hero stories, but the kind of life that God offers to us in Christ. A life that only he can make possible for us. A life truly worth living. Well, this morning, we finally meet Life's opposite. We finally have an encounter with death, the enemy of life itself.

Jesus is with his disciples somewhere far off when he gets word that his friend, Lazarus, had fallen ill. Lazarus, and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, whom we know from the gospel of Luke, live in Martha's home in Bethany. And for reasons we cannot know, Jesus delays for two days before heading into Judea to the town of Bethany. Perhaps he delays because he's a wanted man there. Perhaps it's for some other reason.

But what we do know is that by the time he arrives, Jesus's friend Lazarus has been dead for four days. And that span of time is significant because Jewish people of that time believed that the Spirit of the deceased departed from the body after three days. In other words, on the fourth day, Lazarus was truly and completely dead.²

So, at long last, Jesus arrives at the outskirts of the village, and Martha receives word that he has come, and she goes out to meet him there. And the first word from her lips when she sees him is this most grief-stricken sentence, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Like you and me, Martha sees death as the final victor over life. She knows that Jesus is powerful; she knows he can cure diseases. But once death comes, it cannot be conquered. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

"I know Jesus. Thank you. Yes, he's in a better place, and I know I will see him again in the resurrection on the last day. That's very kind of you to say. Yes, thank you for coming."

And what Jesus says next is a whole sermon in itself. He seems almost to rebuke her when he says those immortal words, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

² Westminster Bible Companion - John

And then, having given the correct answer, Martha sends for her sister Mary. And Mary runs to him and she falls at the feet of her teacher, Jesus. And again, we hear that sorrowful statement: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Only this time, there’s no follow up from Mary. She doesn’t have the strength to confess her faith in the faithfulness of Jesus as Martha had done. Too overcome with grief and anguish and agony at the reality of death, Mary lets her accusation float in the air. “Lord, if only you had been here.”

And Jesus sees her weeping. He looks around. He sees the people surrounding them all weeping. And the English Standard Version says he was deeply moved; *Embrimaomai*. That translation, “He was deeply moved,” doesn’t quite capture it. The word literally means the snort of an angry war horse. *Embrimaomai*. You can almost hear it. Jesus is furious. At last, he meets his enemy death like an angry horse on the battlefield. Hot angry tears begin to stream down his face as Life itself, the Son of God, confronts death.

If it wasn’t clear to us before, we can be assured that death is our enemy. Death is Christ’s enemy. Life and Light and order meet with death and darkness – Chaos. This chaos God ordered when he spoke at the dawn of creation. In his garden he walked with his beloved children in the cool of the day. This is what it was supposed to be like. But chaos and darkness and death crept in around the edges. And it overwhelmed us, or so it seemed. And so it was with Lazarus, the friend of Jesus – the one whom he loved.

“See how he loved him,” they said. Jesus stands there, weeping, and the people see it as an expression of his love. And they’re exactly right. One phrase you’ll hear in grief literature is that grief is love with no place left to go. Jesus would not grieve if he did not love his friend, Lazarus... If he did not love his friend, then death would not have bothered Jesus in the slightest. But it did, and it does, and he feels that love for each of us. At every death, our savior weeps. Because he loves us and he wants to walk beside us. Because he knows that this is not the way it’s supposed to be.

So, he does something about it. In his fierce anger he comes to the tomb. What are you doing, Jesus? Martha says, “Lord, he’s been dead four days. There will be an odor.” She’s unsure... perhaps she’s afraid. But Jesus persists, saying, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” And he looks to heaven, and he prays to his Father, knowing that all life comes from God. Then, with a loud voice, with a cry of command, he shouts, “Lazarus, come out!”

“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”³ Jesus calls Lazarus by name and leads him out of death and into life. Not because Lazarus is a hero of his own making, but for the sole reason that Jesus loves him – he loves him just as he loves each of us. And the good news of the Gospel, friends, is that he will do this and more for us. He has done more for us. Lazarus emerges still bound in his grave clothes. When Christ himself is raised from death, his grave clothes are neatly folded and put aside in the empty tomb. Death is dealt with. It is finished.

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.” In his cross, Jesus lays down his life for us. In his glorious resurrection, he brings us with him to new and everlasting life.

³ John 10:3

Now we can be assured that death does not have the final say. When you and I close our eyes in this life, by faith we know that we will open them in the life to come. We will awaken unbound when our savior Jesus calls to us by name. The sting of death is gone. The enemy has been conquered. “I am the resurrection and the life! Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Last week, I had the privilege of participating in a funeral for one of the saints of this congregation. It was held at the chapel of the Foothills Retirement community, and it was a beautiful service of witness to the resurrection. And at the end, Mary, the pastor leading the service, stood up and pronounced with confidence the commendation. And if you’ve ever attended a Presbyterian funeral, you’ve heard these words:

*“All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”*⁴

I couldn’t help but think what a bold thing that is to say. Alleluia at the grave. Yet because of what Christ has done, it is not foolish. Our life in Christ is everlasting. He gives us reason to rejoice. He gives us reason to sing, *Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!* Amen.

⁴ Presbyterian Book of Common Worship