New Lazarus
John 11:17-46
February 24, 2019

Benjamin Franklin once said that there were two things certain in life: death and taxes. We want to avoid them both, but we cannot escape from either. Each time we buy something or earn an income we pay tax on them. We cannot avoid that. And all living things die one day.

As we get older, the issue of living longer and healthier becomes an important matter. Living a long life is not necessarily a good thing, unless you are healthy. People say we are young in heart no matter how old we are. That is true, we all feel young in heart regardless of our age. Ashley Montagu[1], a late American anthropologist once said, "The idea is to die young as late as possible."[2] I am sure most of us can agree with him. We want to die young as late as possible.

We want to live long and healthy. And if it is ever possible, we want to avoid death all together. Even in our language, it seems like we want to avoid the topic of death as much as possible. For example, if someone is rescued from a burning building or a sinking ship, we say that a *life is saved*. We don't say that a *death is postponed*. If death is so certain and universal, I wonder why we don't say death is postponed. We didn't save a life; we simply postponed a death.

No doubt that death is universal. We will all have to face it. Every living thing is expected to die one day. So, the question is, "If death is absolutely expected for all living things, why is it so traumatic when it happens?" If it is natural for all living things die one day, why do we feel pain about losing a loved one? And why do we feel the pain even many years after the loved one's death?

Could it be that death is not natural? Death is an intrusion into the created realm. When God created man, the only thing that was not good was the fact that Adam was alone. So, God created a woman to be his companion. There was no sign of death in the original creation. Rather, death intruded into creation as a result of humanity's disobedience to God. In other words, death was not a part of God's original plan. Death was something that went against God's original design for the creation. That is why death brings chaos and trauma into our lives.

[1] Ashley Montagu (1905 – 1999) was an American anthropologist who dealt with issue of race and gender, and how they affected American politics.
[2] http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_death3.html

If something runs against the natural order, it brings chaos and trauma. Death does that, because it goes against God's created order. And it is natural for us to feel the pain and anger, hurt and despair, and sadness and sorrow in the face of death.

Martha and Mary felt sorrow and pain, chaos and despair when their brother Lazarus died. Martha, Mary and Lazarus were siblings, and they were close friends of Jesus.

Jesus was not far away from Bethany teaching his disciples when the word came that Lazarus was sick, very sick, and would probably die. The family was hoping that Jesus would come and heal him. Instead, Jesus purposely stayed where he was for two more days. Can you imagine the desperation of the family?

How would you feel if you or your loved one went to an emergency room at a hospital and had to wait 48 hours for the doctor to show up? Wouldn't you be outraged? If your loved one died while waiting for the doctor, and it took 48 hours for him to show up, you would probably sue the hospital, wouldn't you?

By the time Jesus arrived at Lazarus' home, Lazarus was already dead. An interesting thing is that Lazarus had been dead for four days by the time Jesus arrived. What this means is that Lazarus was already dead by the time Jesus received the message of Lazarus' illness.

According to a New Testament scholar Leon Morris, it would have taken about a day to get to where Jesus was from Bethany. Since Jesus delayed two days and took another day to come to Bethany, we can assume that Lazarus probably died soon after the messenger left Lazarus' home.[3]

So, when Martha seeing Jesus said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," it was not an accusation that Jesus' delay caused Lazarus' death. It was just an out-bust of grief and frustration.

I can almost hear Martha saying, "Lord, why didn't you come right away when you heard the message? If you had left right away, you would have been here two days ago. At least I would not have any resentment against you. But then who knows, you might have brought him back to life, just like you did for Jairus' daughter."

[3] Leon Morris, New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Gospel According to John, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (Grand Rapids, Mich: 1971), p. 539-540.

Martha believed Jesus could heal any disease. She even believed that Jesus could bring the dead back to life.[4] But not after four days of decomposing. She also added these words. She said, "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." However, her confession, "God will give you whatever you ask" probably did not include bringing Lazarus back to life after four days in the tomb.

It is one thing to resuscitate someone from cardiac arrest. It is quite another for a person to be decomposing in the grave for four days and to be brought back to life.

After that, Martha's sister Mary came out to greet Jesus. Mary said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Hearing that Jesus went to the tomb and said, "Take away the stone."

Then Jesus command, "Lazarus, come out!" At his command, dead Lazarus came out of the tomb. If Jesus did not limit that command to Lazarus, do you think every corpse in that graveyard would have come out that day?

Do you think when Lazarus came out of the tomb he came out as his old self? Or do you think he came out as a new person? As a result of experiencing the unthinkable, the unbelievable, and the incomprehensible, Lazarus must have had a real transformation in his life. Jesus said, "Set him free from his wrappings and let him go!" Set him free from all things that bind him to his past.

In a way Jesus was saying to Lazarus, "Be free from your past, and live a new life." I believe Lazarus became a new man. I believe he lived each day, each moment with gratitude and with a new purpose in life for the rest of his life. Not everyone has to experience death and resurrection in order to have a new life. Many of us have a life that is quite different from the past as a result of believing in Jesus.

In this sense, Lazarus' story is not just limited to Lazarus. It is also our story, your story and mine. Like Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb and set him free, he also calls you and me out of dull and meaningless life into something exciting and something new. He wants our lives to be set free.

[4] Matthew 9:18-31.

This story ends with these words, "Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him." When people saw Lazarus, they put their faith in Jesus.

Our new life is to generate faith in other people's heart and life. When people see us living a new life in Christ, when they see what Jesus did in our lives, they ought to be moved to put their trust and faith in Jesus.

We live in a world where true commitment is hard to find. People borrow money but don't always pay it back. Many companies suffer from employees' lack of commitment. The workers do not give fair labor for their wages. According to Gallup Business Journal, disengaged employees are costing American industries about 350 billion dollars a year in lost productivity.[5] People are not faithful in their work.

How about our families? A loss of commitment is common in marriages and families. It is a well-known fact that more than 50% of marriages end in divorce. If a public declaration of commitment fails like that then how much more would we see in private commitment failures? Most of American churches have only a half of its member attend worship service on any given Sunday. This is not because the rest of them are homebound.

Why is it that even many Christians lack in commitment? Many of the modern Americans are focused on short-term rewards. When people don't see the immediate rewards, they quickly lose interest. Commitment grows when we truly realize God's love for us and when we sincerely love God and love those around us. That is what is lacking in many Christians' lives. And this lack of commitment leads to their spiritual mediocrity. The sad fact of our world today is that we lack the spirit of faithfulness and commitment.

We need to ask ourselves this question. "Do people put their faith in Jesus as a result of seeing the way we live, the way we offer ourselves, and the way we serve the Lord?"

What we believe must lead to what we do. Salvation is nothing but the transformation of life. So, let me ask you, "What difference do you have in your life that other people will see it and put their faith in Jesus?" Like Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb, he is calling us to come out of the meaningless existence.

[5] http://businessjournal.gallup.com/content/247/the-high-cost-of-disengaged-employees.aspx

Let us live in such a way that our children, our neighbors, our friends, and our co-workers may see us and put their faith in Christ. That would be the true signs of transformation in Christ.