

“Resurrection Reflection”

March 22, 2026

Scripture: John 11:1-45

Lazarus is an unusual character in the gospels. He’s never mentioned earlier in the gospel of John, but there is a character by that name mentioned in one of Jesus’ parables in the gospel of Luke. Otherwise, we know nothing about him. Yet we’re told he is loved by Jesus, so a very close friend at the very least, along with his two sisters, Martha and Mary. The sisters’ message to him, “Lord, the one whom you love is ill,” doesn’t even require a name. He knows exactly who they mean and exactly what they want. They want him to come and heal their brother.

But Jesus delays. Instead of going to heal Lazarus right away, or even from a distance, as we’ve learned earlier in the gospel that he can do, Jesus does nothing. He sees this illness as an opportunity to demonstrate the arrival of a new reality in the world. Lazarus’s illness and death will become a canvas on which Jesus can reveal the truth of resurrection.

For all the talk about resurrection in the New Testament, we don’t really learn much about it. We never learn, for instance, how it happens, what the mechanism is to accomplish it. The expectation of resurrection is deeply embedded in Jewish belief long before Jesus arrives on the scene. Not everyone holds that expectation. There are certain factions that reject it outright. So, it’s seen as an optional belief but it’s very popular.

Jewish scripture, the Tanakh, what we call the Old Testament, doesn’t mention resurrection at all for the most part. The only reference to it is in the book Daniel which is written much later than the other books. Daniel mentions at one point the expectation that “many of those who are asleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” That sounds familiar, but it goes on to say, “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” That sounds a little different than what we’ve come to understand as resurrection. It’s also different from what Martha seems to mean when she tells Jesus, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Her expectation is a hope for a final judgment and a reward, like the first part of the Daniel quote, but not the second. The idea that a better life awaits us after we’ve left this life is rooted in decades and centuries of hardship and persecution. If we track the development of the idea of resurrection we’ll find it emerges through a long history of oppression and occupation. For the people around Jesus, life was harsh. Rome kept Judea in a stranglehold of taxation and brutal intimidation that meant nothing they did could really improve their condition. Anything they produced went to Rome as tribute to feed its war machine, like all its outlying territories, and any attempt at self-government was met with violence from an overwhelming force.

Their only hope was the promise of resurrection in the next life because this life was intolerable and unjust. When Martha and Mary each tell Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” they’re expressing their disappointment over yet another injustice. Jesus has let them down, just like everything else in their world. Now, all they can do is wait for

the end of everything to see their brother again. There's some comfort in that, but when you're grieving and feeling dejected, it rings hollow, even for the most faithful.

We know this idea of resurrection has developed over time. It took hundreds of years for it to take root in Jewish thought to the point that Martha could recite the hope of it to Jesus like an article of faith. So, it shouldn't be too surprising that Jesus offers a new understanding of it to carry its development even further. When he tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life," he's offering her the possibility of hope in the moment and not in some far-off future. Jesus offers life in the here and now; he offers resurrection as a present reality and not just a vague expectation on the horizon.

To demonstrate that reality he has the people remove the stone from Lazarus's tomb and he shouts for Lazarus to come out.

John's gospel is unique in a lot of ways, as you know, but one in particular is it doesn't have parables like the other gospels. Jesus doesn't tell stories to help folks envision God's kingdom around them. Instead, his actions are embodied parables. For the writer of John's gospel the kingdom of God is present in Jesus and becomes real for all those around him who are willing to trust his message of hope and life, all those who believe in him rather than put their faith in government or temple. Resurrection for Jesus is not some far-off hope reserved for the final judgment, it is a present reality we can live now; it's ours for the taking. We can be resurrected, brought back to life, by trusting in the life Christ brings.

That means we're no longer doomed just to endure hardships and injustice, waiting for a final end to it all. We can embrace resurrection now and live as those who are already raised from the dead. We can risk speaking out for justice and standing beside those who are mistreated. Our resurrection means we have nothing to fear from a world that is mired in oppression and hate because in Christ we carry life and light in the world and nothing can overcome it. Jesus shows Mary and Martha and the people around them immobilized with grief that they are no longer condemned to lives of quiet desperation. They can unbind those who are trapped in death, like their friend Lazarus, and be resurrected to new life where they have power and agency and freedom.

We live in a world where many who claim to speak for our faith believe our only hope is to purify society and rid it of all those elements they believe are unrighteous. They think if we can just eliminate or silence people they deem unfit, undocumented immigrants or gay, lesbian and transgender people or Muslims and Jews and Hindus and Sikhs, eliminate or silence all the people they believe don't really belong, then we'll be ready for final judgment and resurrection. All we have to do is make everything pure through coercion and intimidation and wait for our reward. But Jesus rejects all of that. Jesus offers resurrection now. He offers the possibility of embracing those who are mistreated and oppressed and welcoming them into the circle of his love, into the kingdom of God.

This is what he wants his disciples to see and understand. Life is not meant for hiding in fear and pushing out anyone who might disrupt our comfort and sense of security. It's not meant for just going along with injustice and cruelty so long as it doesn't affect us. Life is meant for

love and compassion and hope. We can have resurrection now. We can have new life now. We can be like Lazarus, emerging from the tomb ready to be unbound. All we have to do is take hold of the life Jesus offers. Say “Yes!” to resurrection; say “Yes!” to new life, and come out of the tomb and be unbound.

Amen