Introduction
We are a little more than halfway through the year, and what a year it has been. Maybe more than other years we face death, whether in our families, our communities, our church, our nation, or around the world. We do not like death. We do all that we can not to talk about it, not to think about it, to delay it, and to prevent it. But in reality, death is a certainty. In fact, after this sermon you will be about 25 minutes closer to death than when this sermon began! Death is a certainty with which we have all dealt on some level. Maybe it was expected, maybe it was untimely, maybe it was tragic, maybe it was even traumatic. What do we believe about God in and through our experiences with death? The Bible gives us a powerful lesson and great encouragement. Today let us look at John 11:1-44 (ESV) in detail.

Our story begins about 15–20 miles across the Jordan River from Jerusalem. Come with me to where Jesus is with His disciples.

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.

John 11:1-2

His name was Lazarus, which means “whom God helps.” He had two sisters: Mary and Martha. He was ill, but that was no problem for Jesus. Jesus, who turned water into wine; Jesus, who with His mere words healed the nearly dead son of an official. Jesus, who healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years; Jesus, who fed 5,000 men,
plus women and children. Jesus, who walked on water! Jesus, who gave sight to a man born blind.

As the Gospel writer John stacked these miracles up one after another after another after another, we begin to believe that Jesus is who He said He is—He is equal with God. Lazarus was ill; that is no problem for Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

“So the sisters sent to him, saying, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill’” (John 11:3). The family lived in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem. But the message Jesus received was unique. Then, as now, women are masters of indirect communication. You see, when my wife says, “Your son is having a tantrum,” she is not merely telling me about the current behavioral status of my son. She is telling me he is my son and she expects me to do something about it. The message from the sisters is also indirect communication which indicates a close relationship. My wife can communicate with me indirectly—and I had better pick up on those indirect cues—because we know each other well. Because these sisters and Jesus knew each other well, their indirect communication would have been a clear message to Jesus.

We learn that Jesus loved Lazarus (φιλεω—phileo, to love—the origin of the word Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love). He loved Lazarus like a brother! What might their relationship have been like? What might their conversations have been like? Did they share any inside jokes? Did they have a favorite place to stroll through in Bethany? What kind of food did they like to eat together? This was a man Jesus loved with brotherly affection.

“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’” (John 11:4). Awesome! But John continued to describe Jesus’ relationship with this family. “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (John 11:5). Divine love (ἀγαπαω—agape love)! Not only did Jesus have brotherly affection for this family, He had divine love for
this family! The other people Jesus had healed were strangers, but this was a family He loved! How would He heal someone He loved? He did not even know the names of the other people He had healed, but He knew Lazarus by name, and He loved him. Healing one He knew and loved would be epic!

John said Jesus had done many other things—so many that the world would not have room for all the books had they been written. As well stocked as our bookstore is, it would be filled to overflowing! John included this story because this healing would be extraordinary! God would be glorified through what Jesus did next!

We are surprised to read, “So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was” (John 11:6). He loved Lazarus like a brother, with a divine love, yet He delayed for two days?! He did not send word to heal Lazarus “whom God helps”?! John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world, that he gave …” but God so loved Lazarus that “he stayed…”? What is going on? If our loved one were sick, we would go quickly!

This delay had a result. “Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” 8The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” (John 11:7-8) Let us review verses 9-14:

Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” 11After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” 12The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” 13Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died …”

John 11:9-14

Jesus said that “this illness does not lead to death…,” “He has fallen asleep,” and, finally, “Lazarus has died” (John 11:4,11,14). He announced
His plan to raise Lazarus using a common metaphor for death: sleep. When the disciples did not understand, He told them plainly. Now, what will Jesus do? No, not some slogan on a wristband, but what will Jesus really do? His delay had a real result: Lazarus, whom God helps, is dead!

Going to Bethany represented a real risk to Jesus and His disciples! Going from Bethany to Jerusalem is like making a left turn out of the church parking lot and going to the Publix on Bonita Beach Road, and His disciples objected. He would not be able to go without being detected by his enemies. But He decided to go: “... for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him” (John 11:15). He was glad that, through this, His disciples might believe. Believe? Believe what?! Bethany is just over the Mount of Olives and He would not be able to go to Bethany without being seen by His enemies. “So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him!’” (John 11:16). Thomas was willing to die with Jesus. The battle lines were drawn—Jesus vs. death. The Son of Man vs. the Grim Reaper. Death is the reigning champ. Death is unstoppable, undefeated. What would Jesus do?

Come with me to Bethany. Do you hear it? The sound of lament. Life in the first century was communal, and mourning was communal, too. Do you hear the wailing, the weeping, the flutes playing? Do you smell the burial spices that were used to prepare Lazarus’ body? Do you see the women dressed in black? Most of the men in the village had gone back to their work, but the women remained. They were beating on their chests, throwing ashes into the air in the common sign of mourning, and weeping with Mary and Martha: “…and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother” (John 11:19). The Bible says many Jews were there. Lazarus had been dead four days. He was really dead. Rabbinic belief said that the soul stayed for three days, but by the fourth day, as the stench of death permeated the air, the soul left. Death 1, Jesus 0. Do you see the tomb with the stone rolled over the entrance? Jesus’ friend Lazarus is dead. Jesus and the disciples were in Bethany, roughly two miles
from Jerusalem, and Jesus was in real danger. The disciples were probably saying to Jesus, “Teacher, do what you need to do quickly. We must go! If we stay here too long, we’re going to die!”

Into this scene, Martha ran with faith and said to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. 22…But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you” (John 11:21-22). Martha had faith in Jesus’ ability to heal … if. Had He come or even said the word, she knew that her brother would not have died. But Jesus pushed Martha to a deeper discussion and demanded greater faith. “Jesus said to her, ‘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?’” (John 11:25-26)

Believe! If that were me, I would have said, “Believe what, Jesus? What am I supposed to believe? My brother is dead! You came too late, Jesus! Do you not hear the wailing? Do you not see the stone in front of the tomb? Do you not smell the burial spices? My brother is dead! What am I supposed to believe?” Maybe some of us have been in that position; we faced death and Jesus did not do what we thought He would do.

That was not Martha’s response; she had a remarkable response. “She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world’” (John 11:26). Martha had faith in Jesus’ ability to heal and believed in the resurrection of the dead, but Jesus pushed her to a deeper reality. In John 4, He had told the thirsty woman at the well that if she drank from the water He gave her, she would never thirst again. In John 6:34, the disciples had said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always,” and Jesus had replied, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Not only is there resurrection through Jesus, He is the resurrection and the life. Are you thirsty? He can give you living water. Are you hungry? He said, “I am the bread of life…” Are you lost? He said, “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11). Are you dealing with death? He said, “I am
"the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Do you have a need in your life? The deeper reality is that Jesus says, “I am…” (John 8:58) to that need.

“Do you believe this?” (John 11:26) He asked Martha just as I ask you, “Do you believe this? Do you believe that to whatever need you have in your life God says, ‘I am’?” Martha did believe. What a marvelous confession! She left to get her sister Mary. Now, Mary comes. The weeping mourners came, too, and were surprised when they saw Jesus—they thought Mary was going to the tomb.

Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

John 11:32-33

Deeply moved and greatly troubled, like a horse ready for war or a race: outrage, fury, anger. He was not upset at their weeping, but at the devastation brought on by death. He was outraged and He was grieved. Death floated around the tomb, gloating at his apparent victory, and taunting Jesus. “What are You going to do, Jesus?” When God looked upon their situation, when He saw the pain that death caused, He was outraged, He was furious, and He grieved.

If you struggle with memory verses, this is the place to start: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). The transcendent God, He Himself, wept. An early Christian confession, the Nicene Creed, says about Jesus: “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father.” God Himself looked at the situation and He wept. Despite the danger to His life, He came to mourn with this family. He who was utterly other, became the same as us. He wept at the sight, the chaos, the wailing, the crying. Death put another tally up on the scoreboard, the result of humanity’s desire to have its own way. We try to defy death and to find the Fountain of Youth, but it is futile. Death laughs. Jesus wept. He is not a
God who stands far off; He is near, God is with us. He weeps with us; He weeps for us. This is our God. He came to the family of Lazarus, despite the threat on His life, to mourn with this family. He loves this family and, in fact, some of the Jews who saw it said, “See how he loved him!” (John 11:36)

In the face of death, believe in His love. This is a marvelous truth. Even if a death is sudden, can you believe in His love? Even if a death is traumatic, can you believe in His love? Even if a death is tragic and leaves you questioning the sovereignty of God, can you believe in His love? The God we worship, the God we serve, is not far off! If any of you are facing death, our God weeps with you; our God weeps for you. So, in the face of an unexpected death, believe in His love. In a tragedy, believe in His love. When someone you love is suddenly taken away, believe in His love. In death, believe in His love. What a marvelous truth and great source of encouragement.

But that is not where the story ends, is it? Come with me to the tomb. “But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?’” (John 11:37) Some of the Jews scoffed. This is the man that Jesus loved? This is the man that Jesus considered a brother? This is the man that Jesus had affection for, this man that Jesus loved with divine love? Could He have not saved him from dying? They joined with Death in taunting Jesus.

They went to the tomb with the stone rolled over it. Once again, Jesus was outraged at what He saw. “Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days’” (John 11:39). Martha objected, but the stone was rolled away. Death moved about the tomb. The smell of death, decay, and deterioration flooded out from the tomb—a nauseating smell! (I once found an onion that had fallen in the back of the pantry and had been rotting for about two weeks. Just the thought still makes me nauseous.) Death mixed with burial spices; Lazarus was dead and had been dead for four days.
Jesus assumed the Jewish posture of prayer—eyes uplifted—and prayed. “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41-42). Believe.

“When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’” (John 11:43). This was a shout of authority. This was how the crowd would cry, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” (Luke 23:21). What did this shout sound like? This was the Word that was in the beginning! By the Word, everything was created from nothing. John 5:28-29 says, “…all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out…” Admittedly, I cannot muster the authority of His words in verse 43, “Lazarus, come out.”

The silence must have seemed like an eternity. Can you imagine if you had been there? The first miracle in the Gospel of John was a cultural faux pas—running out of wine at a wedding in the first century was a cultural faux pas. Maybe for some of you, running out of wine is also a faux pas. But this? This is beyond a cultural faux pas—opening a tomb at a funeral? Those who could stand the stench were gathering around wondering what would happen. What was He doing? Why was the stone rolled away?

Then they looked inside the tomb and saw: “The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth” (John 11:44). He was wrapped as one dead; he could not walk, yet he was hopping out of the tomb. An incredible miracle! Death was defeated! The crowd went wild! They had never seen anything like this … the greatest comeback ever! Death could not believe it had been defeated. But Death said, “I’ll be back.”

Many saw dimly and believed that Jesus was the resurrection and the life. In the face of death, many believed in His power. That day, not only did they believe in Jesus’ love, they believed that He had power over death itself. In the face of death, believe in His love. In death, believe in His power.
The story ends like this: “Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go’” (Luke 11:44). They let him go, and go he did. In chapter 12, we learn that the chief priests sought to kill Lazarus, the man who had just been raised from the dead, because of the many who believed in Jesus because of this miracle.

Conclusion

What do we believe about God in and through our experiences with death? Death did come back. Death thought he had the final laugh when the Son of Man hung on a cross and shouted out, “My God, my God! Why have You forsaken me?” (Matthew 24:46). Isaiah 53 says that He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with our grief. We do not serve and love a God who is far removed from our pain and suffering. We serve a God who came and who gave up all heavenly glory that we might have life in Him and eternally with Him. This is our God.

When we face death, people may mock and taunt and say, “Where’s your God now? If He loves you so much, why is this happening?” My God was on the cross for me! Our God was on the cross for us! People may taunt us and say, “Where is your God now?” Though he was raised, Lazarus died a long, long time ago. Jesus also died a long, long time ago, but He is not dead. He is alive! The Bible says that He is in heaven interceding for us. He is praying for us that as we struggle with death, our faith does not fail. Jesus sends forth His Spirit that we might be empowered and emboldened to live for Him; to know that He is the resurrection and the life.

You see, death is the result of our sins and our rebellion against God. Resurrection and life are the result of what Christ has done, and His obedience to God. Believing in Him, we can have abundant life now and a total life hereafter because of the finished work of Jesus Christ. “O death, where is thy sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). The love and the power of our Jesus!
In the face of death, **believe in His love.** See the Man of sorrows; see the Man acquainted with our grief. In the face of death, **believe in His power.** Look at the stone rolled away. Look at the empty tomb. **In the face of death, believe in His love. In the face of death, believe!**