The Grip of Death and the Power of Christ
John 11:28-44

We're looking at John's gospel, and today at the second half of John's account of the raising of Lazarus. Before we look at that, look at this: *One Life. Live it*. It began as the tag line of the Camel Trophy off-road 4x4 competitions, before being adopted by Land Rover as one of their advertising slogans.

But ask yourself, what's the philosophy behind that? It's that you only get one shot at life, so don't spend it sitting on the sofa with a remote control in your hand, get out there, seize the adventure, and live!

Ok. But now ask yourself, what's the shadow lurking behind that philosophy of life? Death. You only have one life and then you're going to die. And it's all going to be over. So live while you have the chance. But it doesn't mention death by name, does it, because it can't. Because you can't live a happy, carefree, exciting life if you keep thinking about death. 'Don't keep reminding us, that's morbid, enjoy life.'

So let me ask those of you who aren't yet Christians, doesn't that bother you? You see, if you believe there is no God and death is the end, then death is *the* brute fact of life. *One* life. But you can only live life, and be happy in life, by ignoring that fact. By not letting it intrude on your life. Because if you do let it intrude, it will just depress you. As Ernest Becker, the American cultural anthropologist writes in his book, *Denial of Death*, we do all that we can to ignore the reality of our own mortality, and we do it, he says by throwing ourselves into life.

Or, more recently, Luc Ferry, the secular French philosopher, has argued that knowing we and our loved ones will die is one of the things that sets us apart from animals. And yet, he says, we find the prospect of our own death unimaginable, it's wrong, it's disturbing, so we try not to think about it.

So, if you're not yet a Christian, don't you think it odd that you have to ignore the great fact of life to get through life?

You see, it's not just that if there is no God then death is the end, it's that if there is no God death makes a mockery of meaning, because it makes life ultimately meaningless. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Macbeth has just been told of his wife's death, to which he responds, "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, *Signifying nothing*." (Act 5, Scene 5).

Because if there is no God, and death ends it all, then life truly signifies nothing. But you can't and you don't live like that, do you? You live like life and the way you live life *does* matter. For you and those around you. And you're not wrong, you're right. But you're not living consistent with your worldview, with your view of death.

We're haunted by death. But like a child scared of ghosts, who hides her head under a pillow, we hope the ghost will go away if we don't think about it.

So, might there be a better way? A better way to see death and a better way to live life? And today's passage tells us that there is. And from it I want us to see three things: the emotions of Jesus, the commands of Jesus, and the power of Jesus.

The Emotions of Jesus

What makes you angry? What makes you cry? What stirs those kind of emotions says a lot about what matters most to us doesn't it? And here we see Jesus getting emotional, and it says a lot about what matters to him.

His friend Lazarus - brother of Martha and Mary - has died, and Jesus has arrived at Bethany their village, four days after his death. Martha meets him on the outskirts, then finds her sister and tells her, v28, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And so Mary leaves their home and goes to meet Jesus, and John tells us, v31, 'When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.'

So Mary is surrounded by mourners. Some of whom, as dictated by their customs and culture, would have been professional mourners. Just like we might hire a band to play at a wedding, they would hire people to weep and wail at a funeral.

But Mary doesn't head to her brother's tomb, she heads to her brother's friend, and John tells us, v32, 'she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And as Hendrik pointed out last week, that is word for word what her sister Martha had told Jesus back in v21. And as Hendrik said, even that is a statement of faith - 'Jesus, your presence would have made a difference; you being here could have, would have, averted death.'

But it's also an example of how we all dread death. As Luc Ferry, the philosopher who I mentioned earlier, says, 'our greatest desire is not to die, or have our loved ones die on us.' 'And Jesus, if you had just been here, our loved one would not have died. You could have prevented this thing which we dreaded from happening.'

So look how Jesus responds, v33, '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.' And having asked where they have laid Lazarus, John tells us in v35, that 'Jesus wept.'

You know, one of the things that I find most disconcerting about Buddhism is the smile on the Buddha's lips. You see Gautama knew that the great problem of life was suffering and ultimately death. So how do you deal with it? By seeing it as an illusion. By dissociating yourself from it. By smiling in the face of it.

Jesus is no smiling Buddha. He weeps.

But neither is Jesus a stiff-lipped Stoic, who tells you the problem is not the suffering and death you're facing, it's your response to it. That if you can just accept that you can't change it you'll find peace. But Jesus isn't at peace, he is deeply moved and greatly troubled.

Ok, but neither does he trade in the trite platitudes of 'One life, live it' - what Augustine would have called, 'cruel optimism'. He comes to the house of death and the place of mourning *and he grieves*.

But what's he grieving over? You see, right from the beginning of this account we know that Jesus knows that he's going to raise Lazarus. That there *is* going to be a happy ending. So why all the emotion?

Well, look at John's description of his response: v33 again, 'He was deeply moved in his spirit.' And when he comes to the tomb, John repeats it, v38, 'Jesus, deeply moved again.' Now, is that just Jesus' deep, inner compassion? He sees all this suffering and his heart aches? Well, maybe. Except, outside of the Bible, every time the Greek word underlying that phrase is used of people it means anger, or outrage. It's why you might see in the footnotes of your Bible an alternative translation, he was indignant.

So why is Jesus angry, outraged, indignant in the face of this grief and mourning? Is it that some of the mourners are professionals - profiting from the family's grief? Maybe, except John makes absolutely no suggestion that that's the case or that they're being hypocritical.

More likely, Jesus is angered at the fact of death. That people he loves - like Lazarus - die. That people he loves - like Mary and Martha - suffer the death of loved ones. That disease and suffering and death have entered a world where they had no place to be. And so if instinctively you sense 'death is wrong, kids should not die of cancer, wives should not be robbed of husbands, or husbands of wives, lives should not be snuffed out, the world should not be like this' Jesus would say, 'you are so right.' But that means Jesus makes more sense of your life than Buddhism or stoicism or the atheistic, materialistic world-view of One Life Live It.

But Jesus' anger, and his tears, also tell you that you are not alone in your suffering and your grief. Some years back atheists, like Richard Dawkins, funded an advertising campaign on London buses featuring the slogan, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." Except, as even some secular commentators pointed out, that's great if you're able to enjoy your life living on an Oxford academic's salary. But what if you can't. What if you don't have the money, or the health, or social connections to enjoy life? What if your life is filled with poverty or pain or sorrow and now there's no God? Then you're alone. And there's also no hope.

But when you see Christ angry and weeping at sin and sorrow and death you know you are not alone. There is a God who is moved by your suffering, touched by your grief or by any of those things that carry the echo of death, like broken relationships or seemingly irredeemable mistakes. There is a God who cares, and cares to the point of anger and weeping and has come as a man, 'a man of sorrows' Isaiah calls him, 'and acquainted with grief' (Is 53:3). A Man who weeps with those who weep and mourns with those who mourn.

But commentators point out another reason why Jesus might be angry or indignant here, and that's the unbelief of the mourners, maybe even of Martha and Mary. Because you know that you can love someone deeply and still be deeply disappointed, even angry with them, when they fail to live as they should. And back in v23, Jesus had said to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." And in v25, he had said, "I am the resurrection and the life." And here he is, the Son of God, the one who has promised Lazarus will rise, the one who is resurrection life itself, and people are weeping and grieving as if there's no hope. And there's even a hint of accusation in the words of some of the crowd, v37, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

I think the hardest funeral I've ever had to take was back in the UK, twenty-plus years ago. And it was of a grandmother who had a genuine Christian faith, but whose family did not. And as the coffin was brought in to the funeral chapel, and the family filed in behind it, the weeping became

wailing and then screams of grief and it was awful to hear. And stood in front of Lazarus' tomb, it's that hopelessness, that darkness, that living death in the face of death, that so disturbs Jesus.

Because life does not need to be like that. Because The Resurrection and The Life has walked in to the place of death. And the shadows are about to flee.

The Commands of Jesus
Look at v38-39, 'Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone."' It's his first command.

And commenting on this passage, John Calvin, the great reformer, writes, 'Christ does not come to the tomb as an idle spectator but like a wrestler preparing for the contest.' Which is absolutely true, except there really is no contest, is there! Except one. An unexpected one.

Jesus orders the stone sealing the tomb to be rolled back and John tells us, v39, '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."

And so Martha, ever practical Martha, tries to stop him: You don't want to do that Jesus, think of the smell, think of the decay, think of the stomach-turning nature of it all. No perfume, no pounds of spices can ever mask that stench of death.

Don't you think that's ironic, that Martha, who so wanted her brother to live, is now putting obstacles in Jesus' way? But don't you think it's also ironic how so often we do the same thing? Maybe there's some besetting habit that you wish you could be free from. Maybe there's some character trait, or emotional response that you wish you could change, maybe there is some shadow from the past that keeps you bound, or maybe it's just the thought of becoming a Christian in the first place. And Jesus asks to roll back the stone blocking access to our hearts and we pull back and say 'you can't go there Jesus.'

But Jesus is not squeamish. And there is nothing in life or death, in our suffering or our sin that he has not seen or smelt before.

Verse 40-41, 'Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone.' And so what Jesus is about to do is not primarily about restoring a man to life, or giving two sisters back their beloved brother. It's about the glory of God revealed in Christ. And revealed as he restores a dead man back to life and a brother back to his sisters. It's that in this action you and I get to see something of who God really is. The One who weeps with those who weep, who is outraged at the sting of death, who does not avoid the place of sorrow or suffering but makes sense of life, and before whom *death* has no power.

Which is why he prays how he prays, v41-42: 'And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I 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." In other words, he is drawing the crowd, and you and me, into the drama. That as we watch this, and see what happens, we might believe Jesus really is who he says he is.

So what does happen? It's Jesus' second command. Verse 43, 'When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."

Let me ask you: whose voice can pierce death? Whose voice can penetrate that impenetrable barrier, that sound-silencing shroud of death? Can yours? Does death pay the slightest attention to your voice? What reply does the grave give to your words? For those of us who are parents sometimes we struggle to get our own children to listen, let alone obey our voice. Do the winds, do the waves, does disease and suffering, death and the grave, listen to you?

You see, death doesn't just humble us in that we all die, it humbles us because it shows us how impotent we are. Our secular culture tells us 'believe in yourself' and death replies 'who do you think you are?'

But there is One whose voice death leaps to obey.

The Power of Jesus

And the voice that at creation said, 'Let there be light' and there was light, the voice that spun stars into space and planets into orbit now calls the dead from his tomb. Verse 43 again, "Lazarus, come out." And as someone else has said, it's just as well Jesus prefixed a name, Lazarus, to the command or else every dead person from miles around would have come out.

Verse 44, 'The man who had died came out, his hands and his feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Now, if this had happened today the TV crews would have descended on Bethany and Lazarus would have been interviewed and no doubt got a book deal out of his near-death experience. What did you see Lazarus? Where did you go?

Except John doesn't do any of that, because the hero here is not Lazarus but Christ. Because this wasn't a *near* death experience, this was death, and the overturning of death, by the One who can command it to release its grip.

And yet, it's just a taster of what was yet to come. Because there would be another day, and another tomb and another stone blocking the way. But like this one, that stone would also be rolled away and that tomb will also be emptied of its contents as the One who speaks these words himself walks out.

Except here, Lazarus comes out *with* his grave clothes - he's going to need them - he will die again. But in the resurrection of Christ, Jesus leaves his grave clothes behind, because he will never die again. As Martin Luther said, at the cross death swallowed Jesus, but Jesus burst death's belly and so swallowed death. And in the death of Christ, death bit off more than it could chew.

Because Jesus has not simply born our sorrows and carried our griefs, and he did not come simply to have compassion on us. Instead, at the cross, he took the curse of death itself upon himself and defeated it. And in his death, death dies. As Paul writes of Christ's resurrection, '"Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"'

And so, if the raising of Lazarus was just a taster of what was to come, the Bible tells us that the resurrection of Jesus is just the first-fruits of the harvest to come. Because the day will come when all the dead - including you and me - will hear his voice: 'Come out!' And we too will be raised.

So, if you're not yet a Christian, what makes most sense of the way you really live? That life is ultimately meaningless and death is merely a part of the circle of life? Or that death is wrong, and life should not be like that, and life does have meaning, and death is not the end? And if your heart tells you at the very least you wish Christianity were true, maybe it's time for your head to catch up.

And for those of us who are Christians, look again at Jesus giving the command to unbind Lazarus, it's his third command, and know you too have been unbound. Unbound from the fear that God does not care about your suffering; unbound from the idea that life is meaningless, and unbound from the dread of death.

And instead of burying our heads under a pillow, you and I can face our own deaths and the deaths of our loved ones, knowing that in Christ death has been vanquished, and its belly has been burst. And so as Paul says to the Thessalonians, we grieve, but not as those who have no hope.

So, do we have one life and should we live it? Yes we do. And yes we should. In *this* life. But Resurrection Day is coming, and the command of Jesus will be heard, and death's grip has been broken, so live in the light and the glorious hope of that.