

# From Lent To Resurrection

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## **John 11:1-44 The Raising of Lazarus**

**Discuss:** what is something life-giving you enjoy doing? What is something you would like to do but you have put on the shelf for a long time?

### **Have you considered how you will respond to Lent yet?**

I know it's way too early in the year to be thinking about it! You are probably going: I can't believe you are even asking me that question!!

I couldn't agree more but the fact is that Lent starts this Wednesday and there are only 6 weeks to the start of the holy week!

I was getting a haircut recently when the hairdresser remarked how soon Easter was this year and there is some talk about making it a fixed date. And then wondered to me what it was about anyway?

I said it was the Christian celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And she said she thought so but wasn't sure, and that while her father was Catholic, none of the family had ever gone to church. I remarked: It's probably about the most significant thing that has ever happened to the world. Something that no other religion can claim. The Resurrection of the Son of God who was crucified!!

We should be glad that we know the hope of this resurrection and the personal call to follow Jesus for the rest of our lives that we each received, for there are many who are not hearing about this hope nor understanding it.

Today I want to ultimately give you a few suggestions about a way you could frame and celebrate the next 7 weeks til Easter Sunday and to convince you along the way that you could focus on the resurrection rather than just the cross as you approach Lent this year.

**It seems that in recent years the trend on social media is to ask: What am I going to give up for Lent,** as though this will somehow help me ...? It seems to me that the possible suggestions given for that...coffee, internet, chocolate, somehow trivialise the context and intent of such a season as this and that we need a bigger perspective on what it could be for.

To start we need a little information about how Lent is seen in church history. It's all pretty tenuous, no real precedent except maybe a very original tradition of fasting while Jesus is in the tomb.

In brief, there appear to have been several early fasting customs in the post apostolic church, ranging from 1-2 days, to 6 days, eventually to a fixed 40 day season set by the Council of Nicea in 325. From a range of possible reasons, this period of 40 days, was seen as the time for self examination and penitence, demonstrated by self denial in fasting. There is also a tradition around this period as being a preparation of new Christians for baptism and then extended to the whole church to encourage a focus on discipleship. One source said it gradually lengthened to make up for the waning zeal of the church and to give more time for instruction because there were so many pagans lining up for baptism.

### **Let's examine this link between Lent and baptism for a moment.**

In A.D. 313 the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and made it legal—even preferable—for Roman citizens to become Christian. Suddenly the church had a lot of adult baptisms to celebrate!

But that created a challenge: How was the church supposed to ensure that people who wanted to be baptized were serious about Jesus? And what did the church need to do to shape these new Christian lives? Baptism alone was not enough. More was needed to form these new Christians as disciples of Jesus.

So the church developed a 40-day course of preparation for baptism—a time of Bible study, catechism study and spiritual disciplines including prayer and fasting. This was a super-charged “40-day spiritual adventure” or “40 days of purpose”. The idea was that during those 40 days believers should be either preparing for their own baptism or encouraging someone who was preparing for baptism. 40 days does have a lot of Biblical precedent.

Lent became about focusing on our union with Christ’s death and resurrection in baptism and Romans 6:3-4 served as a theme text: *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”*

In terms of doctrine, this put the emphasis not only on God’s gift of forgiveness (justification), but also on the gift of new life in Christ and the Holy Spirit (sanctification). Lent was a time for new and veteran Christians to live into—to “practice”—the basic moves of the Christian life – what we call discipleship.

In other words, Lent was developed in what we now call a “missional context.” It was a pastoral innovation for a time much like our own, where vast numbers of people do not grow up in the church. Lent was the church’s way of saying yes to the free offer of salvation and no to cheap grace—baptism without discipleship.

But by the time John Calvin and the reformers came along, the memory of Lent as a season for shaping new Christians had long faded. Adult baptisms were rare. Just about everyone was baptized as an infant. The Lenten disciplines were still practiced, but they were often imposed by the church in a distorted way as a means of currying favor with God.

So Calvin said yes to the practice he felt his people needed—teaching built around the catechism. But he said no to the season of Lent as too hopelessly superstitious to be of help to his people.

To summarise, Lent has a possible traditional connection to the Easter events and to fasting while Jesus was in the tomb, this gradually lengthened to 40 days and was linked to preparing for baptism and discipling churchgoers.

### **So how should we celebrate Lent today?**

Maybe we could recover the idea that Lent is not just about Jesus’ suffering and death, but also about our union with Christ in baptism and our being raised in Christ to a great and living hope. That is not to say we shouldn’t focus on restorative practices such as prayer, fasting, and repentance, Sunday church and seasonal celebrations—disciplines that are so life-giving that we plan on keeping them going long after Lent ends. Not at all. We need those because they keep us grounded and structured in our own lives and the sense of community we share.

But how about we think about Lent this year as a season where we focus on what is **transformative about our lives lived in resurrection or living hope.**

**Here are some reasons why.**

I see that the end of goal of Easter is not Friday but Sunday.

What do I mean by this?

The end goal on which we fix our hope is the **resurrection** of Jesus Christ the Son of God, not his death. Yet our sole emphasis on fasting and penitence, self denial, introspection during Lent may lie more in the Friday cross than the Sunday resurrection.

This is not to deny the way of the cross; a very critical place to come to as we consider discipleship. But it is to say that it does not end there. And in fact it is only in the power of the resurrection and the hope to which we are called that we may find it possible to go down in the death of Jesus and lay down our lives and find the power to live life as a new creation.

This is where we can start to see the relevance of the church's focus on baptism at Easter. Let's use our reading today to see how this comes to life, especially as we focus again on the person of Jesus Christ who is the Source of living hope, and as much as anything my purpose here today is to reinvigorate your personal picture, your personal relationship to Jesus Christ as you study him and see Him at work and can then apply that to yourself, now in this very moment of time. **Why?** Because this relationship, as critical as the resurrection is to the whole world, is the most important thing that can ever happen to you and the more you cultivate it the more you will live life.

As a story the reading of Lazarus' resurrection is one full of suspension and raw emotion and a compelling picture of the Son of God as he confronts death and lays out in an enacted parable his true mission and purpose on the earth.

Following from the feeding of the 5000 where the power of Jesus' divine being spills out in an extraordinary way and where he then starkly realises how critically people view him as a miracle worker rather than what he truly is, this last miracle or sign is very deliberately staged. His time was now limited and the Pharisees had already tried to stone him and were hell bent on stopping his influence.

But Jesus wants to demonstrate the glory of God and the power of His resurrection to defeat death finally and for all time. And so when he hears that Lazarus is sick unto death, **he stays where he was for two days.** Seems incomprehensible doesn't it? If you love someone you go and do everything you can to help.

But no, Jesus stays put saying: *"This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."*

No doubt his disciples were quite relieved by this staying put, because they were remembering that only a short while ago the Jews had tried to stone him in Judea. So when Jesus then says, now it's time to go back, they were a little gobsmacked...*you're going back!* Jesus basically says *there's no time to waste, Lazarus is dead and I am going to wake him up.* And he reiterated that it was for their benefit.

The disciples decide they're better off to go and die with him than remain behind, missing the point really, but nevertheless on the road with Jesus.

Deliberately, he let Lazarus die and the family grieve. When he gets to Bethany, he is met with a tidal wave of grief and anger and shock and disbelief

In the feeding of the 5000, one thing we noted was that when Jesus saw the multitudes who had followed him, he was moved with compassion and said: *they are like sheep without a shepherd and he began to teach them*. This story has a similar capturing of Jesus' raw emotion.

This story reveals deeply moving and poignant moments when both the sisters Martha and Mary share their accusation and grief: *Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died*. Here we have Jesus' response.

*<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. <sup>34</sup> "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. <sup>35</sup> Jesus wept. <sup>36</sup> Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" <sup>38</sup> Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb.*

Martha was crying, Mary was crying, all the mourners were crying. Finally Jesus deeply moved was crying too. The shortest most poignant verse in the Bible. *Jesus wept*. What does this say to you?

This was something more than distress and grief at the death of Lazarus because he was about to raise him up...this was a groaning in spirit, even a rage...a groaning of identification with this creation caught in the in betweenness of our state...between the now of life that ends in death and pain of separation and the ultimate hope of our resurrection in Christ. But for then, at that moment, the stench of death hung in the air of a world ( symbolised by Lazarus' death) literally damned with no hope of a future and he raged against that sentence and spoke the words: Lazarus, COME OUT.

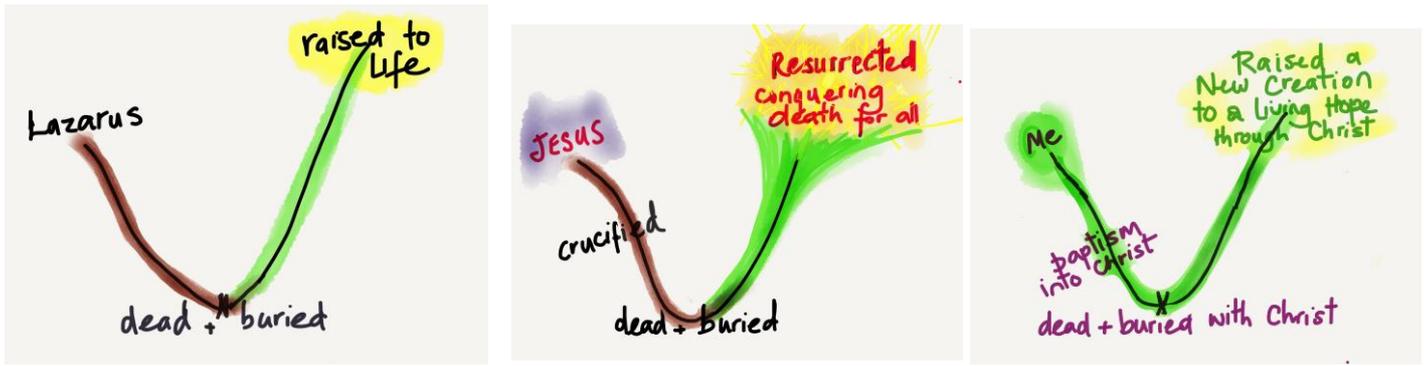
This story we know and feel is our story too. We are all Lazarus's and we have all suffered the loss of Lazarus'. We are caught in the in betweenness of life and death, the separation and pain that death causes for each of us.

But into this Jesus proclaims: ***I am the Resurrection and the Life***. *The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;* <sup>26</sup> *and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

And he raises Lazarus from that stinking tomb and commands the grave clothes to be taken off!

The reaction is varied. Some believe and others become more determined to kill him. And from this point on Jesus withdrew from public life and doing any more signs until He himself became the the Conqueror of death. The death and resurrection of Jesus with finality sealed our HOPE and our destiny and we are thank God, are *born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead*. For eternity this TRANSFORMS the picture we have of reality.

Here's a pictorial summary of what we have been saying:



**1 Peter 1** <sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

**So I come back to Lent and I want to offer the suggestion that we focus on the resurrection as we enter this season. And especially that we focus on Jesus who is Living Hope and that which results from His resurrection which is the power to be a new creation - what is transformative and generative- life-giving.**

#### *What Is Living Hope?*

Our hope is not based on something uncertain like who will win the World Cup. We hope that the All Blacks will win but we cannot be certain.

That is not the way Peter thinks about hope. The coming of Christ is a matter of complete confidence for all the writers in the New Testament. It is *full assurance, or strong confidence that God is going to do good to us in the future.*

But there is something even more peculiar about Christian hope: Peter calls it "living hope." What does that mean? "living hope" is fertile, fruitful, productive hope. Living hope is hope that *has power* and produces changes in life. So Christian hope is *a strong confidence in God which has power to produce changes in how we live now.* It's the impact of resurrection power released into the earth.

#### **1. There is Hope for myself.**

*Lent isn't about punishing ourselves for being human – the practice of Lent is about peeling away layers of insulation and anesthesia which keep us from the truth of God's promises. Lent is about looking at our lives in as bright a light as possible, the light of Christ.* Nadia Bolz Weber, an Ash Wednesday sermon

In the light of Christ we see a God who is running after us in undignified abandon.

We observe first hand a God of deep and utter compassion who recognises our grief and agony and inability to feed or save ourselves. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Bread of Life. I am the Resurrection.

I may therefore abandon myself to His love and in His truly amazing gentleness find completeness – an aliveness only possible through his transformative love. This is why I say make Christ your goal , be found in Him. Love Him and let Him love you.

There is hope for me in personal intimacy with Christ where I find myself loved and who God says I am affirmed. From this will flow creativity, imagination, service, freedom, joy and fun. Why not let yourself enjoy some of these moments this Lent. Be kind to yourself and know that Jesus is always glad to be with you.

## **2. There is Hope in the future**

Jurgen Moltmann said: Jesus' healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only true 'natural' things in a world that is unnatural, demonised and wounded.

Death, decay, entropy and destruction are the true suspensions of God's laws.

We are going to enjoy a wildly new DAY. Why not celebrate that this Lent.

Let what is generative- having the power of giving new life, birthing in you be loosed. What's that thing you put on the shelf? Instead of self denial this Easter, why not take an opportunity to create, do something you love doing, birth something new, sow some new seeds in your relationship to Jesus, for yourself and for others.

## **3. There is hope for the world.**

The Christian hope is directed towards a new creation of **all things** by the God of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On our own we have only limited, uncertain hopes...how most people are living ...put on a happy face...but

**Our** hope is critical to a world looking for hope, but we must believe in our own theology of hope and be proud of it and give it to the world.

This Lent really embrace the hope that is within you and be generous, so you may be the instrument of giving that hope to someone else because you believe that it is the answer to the world.

## **Malachi 4:2**

"But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping and skipping with joy like calves let out from the stall."