

John 11:21-27 I am the resurrection and the life

Tim Anderson 24/4/22

Back in February, we had a visit from Luke and Jane,  
and so we interrupted our series on the 'I am' sayings of Jesus.  
We displaced 'I am the resurrection and the life'  
and relocated it to after Easter.

And I have to say that it's a bit of a parable  
of how I see God working events together  
in a way that works beyond my planning.

What I'm saying is that Luke and Jane could have come on any Sunday  
but they chose to come on the Sunday  
that I had scheduled 'I am the resurrection and the life'.

So it is 'I am the resurrection and the life'  
that we do the Sunday after Easter.

And of all the 'I am' sayings,  
'I am the resurrection and the life'  
must be the most appropriate to do the Sunday after Easter.

I didn't plan that.

God did.

You are welcome to say that it is a coincidence.

But these kind of coincidences  
happen too frequently to me to all be coincidences.

It's a bit like 1/100 year weather events at the moment.

We get 3 1/100 year weather events in 5 years.

There must be a reason behind it.

I am claiming that God oversaw the details of the preaching roster.

So 'I am the resurrection and the life'.

What is Jesus saying about himself?

Well the saying comes in the middle of a story.

It's the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

I preached that story here in 2018,  
so I'm not going to consider the whole story in detail.  
We'll focus on the 'I am' saying.  
But we can say that the broader event bears on the 'I am' saying.  
If it wasn't for Lazarus,  
Jesus wouldn't have been talking about resurrection.  
But Jesus is talking about far more than raising Lazarus.  
Lazarus is just a bit of a foretaste of what Jesus is talking about.  
Let me put it starkly.  
When Jewish people talked about resurrection,  
they were not talking about what happened to Lazarus.  
Does that sound strange to you?  
If it does, it's because we have tended to get a bit lazy  
in the way we talk about things.  
11:23 "Jesus said to Martha,  
"You brother will rise again.""  
Martha didn't take it from what Jesus said,  
that he was about to raise Lazarus back to life.  
She took it that Jesus was comforting her  
with words of trust in God's promises for the future.  
We might do the same thing at a funeral.  
Dorothy Glover died a few months ago.  
We comforted one another by telling each other,  
"She was a woman of great faith in the Lord Jesus.  
She might have died.  
But we know that she will rise again.  
She knew that she would rise again.  
Death had no fear for her."  
Martha heard Jesus saying something like that.  
And I think she was not mistaken.  
Jesus was saying something like that.

The difference for Martha compared to us is that it wasn't immediately clear to a first century Jew that there was going to be a resurrection at the end of the world. The Pharisees believed and taught that there would be a resurrection. The Sadducees believed and taught that there would not be a resurrection. In Matt 22, the Pharisees and the Sadducees try to enlist Jesus in their argument with one another. And Jesus comes down clearly on the side of the Pharisees. There is going to be a resurrection. And Martha is on the same page as Jesus. 11:24 "I know that he will rise in the resurrection at the last day." Whether Martha had picked that up from Jesus in earlier conversations, or whether her faith in God just made her sure that God raised the dead, I'm not sure. But for whatever reason, Martha had faith in the resurrection. But what happened to Lazarus was not the resurrection. Lazarus was raised to life, but at some point he died again. At the resurrection at the end of the age, people are raised never to die again. People are raised to live in the new heavens and the new earth. Our bodies will be different then. We won't get old or get sick. We will live with God in the new creation forever. That's what the resurrection is.

So when Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life", he's not saying anything radical about what's going to happen in the future. The radical thing is who is going to do it. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The natural thing for Martha to believe is that God would raise the dead. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection".

When Jesus says, "Do you believe this?" to Martha, he's not asking her whether she believes in the resurrection. He's asking her does she believe that he is going to do it. Jesus is the one who will raise the dead at the end of the age. Do you believe this?

Jesus goes on to say,  
"The one who believes in me will live,  
even though they die;  
and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."  
This is telling us that participation in the resurrection comes by believing in Jesus.  
There is neither resurrection nor eternal life outside of Jesus.  
Now in a pluralist and multicultural country,  
statements of Jesus like this jar for many people.  
How can you say that your way is the only way?  
Not everyone was born into a house  
where they were taught to follow Jesus.  
No doubt you like me have heard comments like that.  
Now Jesus comments here are not a one off.  
We looked at another 'I am' saying of Jesus.  
"I am the way the truth and the life,  
no one comes to the Father except through me."  
The claim is just as exclusive.  
Jesus is not at all shy about making exclusive claims.  
So I want to spend a few minutes thinking  
about how that can work in  
with ideas of tolerance and religious freedom.  
Tolerance means letting other people do things  
the way they want to do them.  
Some people are going to want to practice religions  
that are not Christianity.

You have migrants from India,  
Some people are going to want to build a Hindu temple.  
You have migrants from Asia,  
some people are going to want to build a Buddhist temple.  
You have migrants from the Middle East,  
some people are going to want to build a Mosque.  
Can Christian believer that you need to believe in Jesus to have eternal life  
and at the same time believe  
that it's OK to build places of worship of other religions?  
I think the answer is yes.  
I'm not saying that Christians always behave that way.  
Particularly when it comes to the building of Mosques.  
Sometimes there will be Christians who will protest.  
They will say, "Australia is a Christian Country.  
We shouldn't build Mosques here."  
Or "Muslims don't allow Christians to build churches in their countries.  
So why should we let them build Mosques here?"  
Or "Muslims would like to gain power in Australia  
and restrict people practicing the Christian faith here,  
so why should we allow them to gain a toe hold?"  
But you see it's actually one of the big differences  
between the Old Testament and the New Testament.  
In the Old Testament,  
God's people were told to outlaw the worship of other gods in the nation.  
If you were a king of Israel  
and you allowed people to continue to worship Canaanite gods,  
then that was a failing.  
You were not doing your kingly duty  
in building a nation that feared the one true God.  
But in the New Testament,  
this all changes.  
Jesus seeks to persuade people to follow him

to live by his teaching.

But he never forces anyone.

You remember the week prior to Easter,  
we read the story of Jesus telling Peter to put his sword away.

Jesus was not interested in Peter using force to defend Jesus.

And he's not interested in us using force  
to defend his teaching or his ways.

So Moslems don't allow Christians to build churches in their countries.

That's true in many Muslim countries.

But you see Muslims do believe in converting people by force.

The Koran tells them that's a good thing to do.

We don't believe in converting people by force.

And that's why we don't seek to restrict their worship.

Is Australia a Christian country?

No it's not.

We certainly don't tell people before they migrate here  
that they are migrating to a Christian nation.

Do Christians even believe in Christian countries?

No we probably shouldn't.

When Jesus says, "The one who believes in me will live"

I think he's saying that it's an individual choice.

It's not really a decision that we make as a nation.

The reason that Jesus left us in churches

is so that the church could be an outpost of his kingdom in the world.

He's expecting the church to bear witness to his resurrection life,  
not the nations that we live in.

The nations will be mixed.

Some will believe,

others will not.

But Christians bear witness to the Lord Jesus  
who is the resurrection and life.

What about if Muslims gain a toehold here

then they will try to restrict our worship of the Lord Jesus?

Well we just have to trust that if we do things Jesus' way, then he will look after the results.

There is something compelling about presenting something to people and not forcing them.

The flip side of that is that there is something off putting about people who try to coerce others.

It's the same with communism and democracy.

People in communist countries don't get a choice.

And they want to force other countries to be communist as well.

On the other hand, people in democracies do get a choice.

They have to vote to stay free.

In any election they could vote for someone who would be a dictator.

And across history sometimes we do.

Hitler was elected.

It might worry you that over time all the countries in the world would gradually become dictatorships.

But it hasn't happened.

Because there is something compelling about freedom.

And so it is with religious freedom.

There is something compelling about a religion that commends belief but does not coerce belief.

So we shouldn't worry that we are going to be taken over by Muslims.

God will look after his kingdom.

He won't be defeated.

We can uphold tolerance and religious freedom

and still rest secure in the knowledge that God is building his church.

Well that was a fairly long excursus.

But the point is just to show that when Jesus makes exclusive statements that those who are committed to tolerance and religious freedom don't have to fear those statements.

But the statements are true  
and we need to not just believe them but act like they are true.  
The one who believes in Jesus will live even though they die.  
And only the one who believes in Jesus will live even though they die.  
What does this mean for us?  
Well it means that what we do here  
has more significance than just a religious club.  
Sometimes people say to me,  
"I like coming to church because it makes me feel peaceful.  
It puts me in the right frame of mind to face the week."  
Well that's very nice.  
I'm glad about that.  
But it's actually not what we are here for.  
We are here to proclaim that the resurrection and the life is in Jesus.  
We must proclaim it  
because the resurrection and the life are only found in Jesus.  
And sometimes the proclamation of those exclusive claims  
won't make you feel peaceful.  
They might make you go,  
"Oh yeah. We do believe that, don't we?  
And I could imagine that some of my friends  
would really do a double take if they heard that we believe that."  
It's not a feeling of peace.  
It's slightly uncomfortable.  
Because I know that what I believe  
is not going to sit well out in the world.  
And yet the world needs to hear it.  
It's their one shot at resurrection and life.  
I need to embrace a little bit of discomfort.  
After all, Jesus embraced more than a little bit of discomfort for me.

OK we've got time for one more issue that this passage raises.

11:26 "Whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

What does Jesus mean by this?

It seems like Jesus actually means two separate things  
by 'resurrection' and 'life'.

The resurrection is something that happens at the end of the age.

All those who have died are raised.

Some are raised to eternal life

which happens with a new improved body in a perfected creation.

Others are raised to be judged.

But the life is something that happens now.

Whoever lives, right now, by believing in me will never die.

Now at a surface level, there's a bit of a challenge for Christians there.

Good faithful Christians we know have died.

I've run their funerals.

If Jesus tarries, one day someone is going to run mine.

But Jesus says,

"Whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

So unless you want to believe that Jesus was mistaken  
and given that he's God the Son,

I think that's unlikely,

we need to work out what he means by 'will never die'.

And we also need to work out what he means by 'lives'.

Because it clearly means more than is a breathing thinking human being.

You don't become a breathing thinking human being by believing in Jesus.

You become one of them by getting born.

"Whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

Jesus means,

"Whoever has eternal life by believing in me  
will never face spiritual death."

I will face physical death

if Jesus takes more than another 50 years to return.

But I will never taste spiritual death.

When my body dies,  
my soul or my spirit whatever you want to call it  
lives on.

In Revelation 6, we read of the souls of faithful Christians who have died  
under the altar in the throne room of God in heaven.

This is while life on this earth is continuing as we currently know it.

The souls of faithful Christians are alive right now with God.

Their bodies might be dead.

But they are alive.

They aren't in their final eternal state.

That waits for the return of Jesus to judge the world.

That's when they get their new bodies.

But their souls are alive right now.

So if you are a believer,  
you have eternal life right now.

You don't have to wait until Jesus returns to have eternal life.

You have life that will not stop.

It won't be interrupted by your physical death.

One day, you will leave your broken body behind on earth.

You won't be needing that any more.

Your soul will go to be with God in heaven.

And then when Jesus returns,

you will get a brand new body

that is not subject to ageing, sickness or death.

Jesus says, "Whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

So let's summarise where we've come today.

#1 There is a resurrection of dead on the last day  
and Jesus is the one who is going to do it.

#2 You participate in the resurrection by believing in Jesus  
and only by believing in Jesus.

#3 Such exclusive claims

shouldn't undermine our belief in tolerance and religious freedom.

#4 These exclusive claims should encourage us

that proclaiming the resurrection is of great importance.

Even if making exclusive claims is not particularly comfortable.

#5 Those who believe in Jesus will not face spiritual death.

When this physical life is ended,

our souls will live on with God until the resurrection of our bodies.

"I am the resurrection and the life.

The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;

and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."