

Easter Sunday
John 11:1-44

Dead in the grave.

Alive from the grave.

Stop wearing clothes from the grave.



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When I was little, my mom liked watching the old monster movies on TV. For those of you who are under forty years old, let me educate you a little bit: most of us only had access to about five channels – a local channel, the three big networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS), and then PBS. So we were only able to watch whatever came on the TV at the time it came on. Yes, we were impoverished. We didn't have it easy like today with a million shows to binge on demand. Back then, if you liked a TV series, you had to make sure you watched on that day at that time each week or else you missed it. So whenever those movies were going to be on TV, my mom loved watching the old black and white monster movies from when she was a kid. There were classic monsters: Frankenstein, Dracula, the Werewolf, the Creature from the Black Lagoon. And then there was "The Mummy." There have been a lot mummy movies made since that original from the 1930's and on: The Mummy, the Mummy's Hand, The Mummy's Tomb, The Mummy's Ghost, the Mummy's Curse, Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy, The Mummy's Shroud, Blood from the Mummy's Tomb, Dawn of the Mummy, then in the late 1990's came the Mummy, The Mummy Returns, The Mummy Tomb of the Dragon Emperor, and again in 2017 The Mummy. I guess Hollywood loves a good mummy movie. I was just a kid, but the thought of a monster wrapped up in old rags shuffling along slowly just didn't seem that scary to me. But obviously there was something to them. I think what it must be is that all of those movies tap into the frightening thought of dead once-dead people becoming alive and walking around. That same fear was evident in people in the Bible when Jesus called a mummy out of a tomb.

I'd like to read the story to you. We have a practice of standing here when God's Word is read, so would you join me in standing as I read it? Thank you; standing also helps us focus on what is being read. It's a bit of a long passage, but it's worth standing for:

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (*read that with me*)

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." (*I think the King James Bible says, "But Lord, he stinketh"!*)

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." (John 11:1-44, niv)
(*Say that with me*)

You've been so good to stand for that – thank you and you can be seated.

The story itself is powerful, but there is so much that it means for you and me because of what we celebrate today, so let's make sure we hear it by starting with where Lazarus was...

Dead in the grave.

Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha were dear friends of Jesus, so it's understandable that Jesus would be so broken up with the news. You probably caught the part that said Jesus got the word that Lazarus was sick, but he waited until Lazarus was actually dead. Jesus and his disciples were a day's journey away from the town of Bethany where Mary and Martha and Lazarus lived. By the time the messenger arrived to Jesus with the news, Laz had already died. Then Jesus waited for *two days* before heading out to Bethany, and then it took a day's journey to get there. By the time Jesus and the disciples arrived, Laz has been dead for four days. Jesus could have come sooner and healed him, or even healed him from a distance, because we've already seen Jesus do both of these things. But he didn't – he waited. That seems cruel, doesn't it? Clearly it was intentional. So why? Let me just put that thought in your head, but know that before we're through we'll answer it, okay? Trust me – there was good reason.

For now, there is no doubt that Lazarus is dead.

When the Jews prepared a body for burial, they usually did it quickly – the same day the person died. It was a way to honor the person and their family. But keep in mind they lived in a very hot climate, which would cause the body to decompose quickly. Isn't that a nice pastel colored Easter egg thought for us today?

But just because they prepared the body quickly doesn't mean it wasn't respectful. The body would be washed, anointed with oil, and wrapped in linen bands. In the case of someone with money like Lazarus, they would also wrap a total of 75 pounds of spices into the folds of strips of linen. Then they would place the body in a tomb. The ground was too hard and rocky to bury someone underground.

The point is there was no mistaking that Lazarus was dead – they'd spent all day preparing his body and then he was in the tomb for three more days before Jesus got there. And just for added proof, by this time there was a terrible smell coming from the tomb. I don't know if you've ever smelled something that has died in the hot sun, but even a little rodent can make a big smell. Imagine a grown man.

If nothing else, this extensive proof of Lazarus' death gives us a stark example of the reality of all of human life and our ultimate unbeatable enemy – death itself. Despite all our best efforts, we can't seem to stop death from happening to every one of us. We can try to prolong life – and we should do that in healthy ways. But no matter how hard we try, for every person who is alive the percentage of those who die is 100. Death is terminal. According to the Bible, death is the result of sin. In the Bible, Romans 6:23 says that “the wages of sin is death.” (niv) One translation says, “work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death.” (tmt) If the result of sin is death, and we all die, what does that mean? *Right: we've all sinned.* The Bible tells us this clearly in Romans 3:23 – “(everyone) has sinned and falls short of God's glory.” (niv) That means that every one of us have sin in our lives and have sinned and come nowhere near to the kind of great life God wants for us. So Lazarus' death is the cold hard fact that this is true – even for Jesus' close friends. Which is one of the reasons why Jesus wept.

But sin results in death in more ways than the flatline of a heartbeat or the cessation of brainwaves. Death is much more than the termination of life. You don't have to die to experience death. Each of us experiences a bit of death every day we live. You know this is true in your own life (if you will quit ignoring it and avoiding it and start paying attention to what your soul is saying to you. It cries out to you about this if you will sit still and listen).

In your own life, you experience sin and death whenever you feel shame – whether because of something you did or because shame is your native self-language. That's sin and death self-talk. It shows up whenever you tell yourself what a failure you are or how worthless you are. Harmful self-talk leads to self-destructive behavior in all kinds of ways. Sometimes we do it directly – like cutting or starving ourselves, or through addictions to things like food or drugs, or behaviors like promiscuity or cutting. Sometimes we do sin and death to ourselves indirectly – by not pursuing that job or that education we'd love because we think we don't deserve it or for fear of failure.

We feel death when we have feelings of guilt. We see sin in the dysfunction in our relationships that result in either abusive behavior from us or letting ourselves be abused by someone else. We see sin and death and feel it in our broken relationships and in our loveless living. All of this is sin – either the consequences of your own sin, or the consequences of someone else's sin against you. On a greater scale we see sin and death in the systemic corruption, the societal schisms of politics and the abuse of power and the rise

of racism and hate and greed, and in wars and destruction and death. This world is hardwired with sin, and you and I with it.

A man named Potter Stewart was a Supreme Court Justice, and he's known for a statement he made in a ruling about free speech – about whether or not the First Amendment covers pornography. He famously said basically this about porn: "I may not be able to define it, but I know it when I see it." You might not be able to define or describe sin, but you know it when you see it and you see it all around you – and *in* you. Don't deny it. The Bible says:

"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth." (1 John 1:8, nlt)

We are all plagued by this sin-sickness that leads to death.

Jesus wept over all of this. It wasn't just the death of his friend. It was because he saw how devastating sin and death are in every facet of our lives. Remember, Jesus was fully human and yet he had never sinned (Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21). He could see firsthand what sin does to us. And it tore him up with grief. Jesus weeps over what sin is doing to you.

Jesus also wept because he knew what was going to happen to himself because of the miracle he was about to do. This is part of why Jesus waited. Raising Lazarus was the last miracle, or sign, that Jesus performed. Jesus knew that raising Lazarus from the dead would set in motion what the religious leaders and the Romans were going to do – arrest Jesus, torture him, and crucify him. And Jesus knew that in his death he would take on the sin of the entire world. He knew that dying for us was his purpose. That didn't mean he liked it – Jesus wept over what was about to happen and what his death would do to his family and friends. But it was necessary. That's what Jesus meant when he said that through Lazarus's miracle, God's glory would be revealed. This last sign would set things in motion that would result in God's plan for *your* life – that God's glory could be a reality for you. And that's what we see when Lazarus is...

Alive from the grave.

Is there anyone else here who is not a morning person? How many times do you push the snooze button on your alarm? Sometimes we just don't want to get up. I wonder if Lazarus felt that way when Jesus called him out of the grave. After all, Jesus said that Lazarus was "sleeping" ... right? Well you and I know that when Jesus said Laz was sleeping, he meant the sleep of death. If you've ever tried to wake up a middle school boy on a Saturday morning – talk about the sleep of death! No, Jesus meant literal, real death. In that culture, "sleep" was a common metaphor for death. So don't think that Jesus was confused about Lazarus.

But I wonder if, when Laz came to life hearing Jesus call him out, I wonder if he thought, "I don't know if I want to come out!" Maybe he felt nice and cozy wrapped up in a cocoon of linen strips and spices. Or maybe he was scared – I imagine so! Think about it – the last thing he knew he was sick, and then four days later he woke up in claustrophobic clothes inside a smelly tomb – and in Lazarus's case, the one who smelt it, dealt it. The smell of his own death hung in the air. That smell wasn't coming from the tomb; it was coming from

inside Laz's linens! He was trapped in there with it. I imagine that would be *incredibly* frightening.

Here's the point of all of that: Lazarus had a choice. Jesus told him to come out. Lazarus could've stayed where he was. Instead, he obeyed Jesus' voice and he came out of that tomb. Lazarus didn't regenerate his own life; only Jesus could do that. But Lazarus *did* have the decision whether or not to come out.

If there is any day of the year and any church service, it is THIS one for *you* to hear that Jesus is calling to *you*: come out! Come out of your sin and death. Come out of the smell of death that is all around you. Come out!

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave, it was Jesus' last "sign." You know what a sign is, right? A sign either represents something or it points to something. A sign exists to call your attention to something more important than the sign itself. As amazing as this miracle was, it was only a sign: it pointed to something much greater than the sign itself. It pointed to when Jesus would rise from the grave, once for all, never to die again so that you could come out of your grave of sin and death.

Now, you know that Lazarus died again, don't you? Church history tells us that Lazarus was forced to leave Judea because the religious leaders were trying to kill him, too, like they did Jesus. If you are trying to snuff out Jesus and his followers, you can't exactly have a guy walking around that Jesus brought out of the grave! So Lazarus fled and became the bishop on the island of Cyprus and lived for thirty more years. And then guess what? HE DIED AGAIN.

But Jesus: Jesus was arrested, tortured, crucified, died, and was buried in a tomb just like Lazarus was. And then three days later Jesus, *by his own power*, walked out of that tomb and will never, never die again, so that you can, too.

So listen: when Jesus calls you out of the grave, you ought to come out! And he's calling you out, right now, today. You can be alive from the grave of sin and death that you currently live in. And then one day, when you *will* die, Jesus will call you out of that grave – never to die again. Because Jesus rose from the grave, you and I can be alive from the grave too. IF we will answer his call today to come out.

What does being alive mean? It means freedom from those destructive thoughts and feelings. It means healing from hurt and woundedness. It means provision for what you need day by day. It means you can know that you are loved by God with all that he is, and you can walk in that confident love moment by moment, day by day. It means you will have forgiveness for all the wrong things that you have done. You will find healing from all your shame and guilt and regret. You will have a clear, clean conscience. And you will now have the power to NOT do those things again. You can have power over hurt, over addiction, over the impulse to live selfishly and at the expense of others. Being alive from the grave means that you will live a life of love from God, for God, and a brand-new kind of love that allows you to love others – even your enemies. You can't change yourself; only Jesus can transform your life, only Jesus can regenerate life out of death. But it's up to you to decide if you will answer or not. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live – even after dying." (vs. 25, niv)

This can happen to you. IF you will answer Jesus' call to you today to come out alive from the grave.

But there's something else I don't want you to miss: it's what Jesus said *after* Lazarus made it out of the grave. Imagine how hard it was for Lazarus to move, all wrapped up like that! Did you ever used to play that game called the "three-legged race"? Not easy to run when one of your legs is tied to someone else's. Imagine how hard it would be to walk when *both* of your own legs are wrapped together! So naturally, then, Jesus said, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." (vs. 44, niv)

When Jesus calls you out of the grave and you answer that call, please...

Stop wearing clothes from the grave!

I'm so grateful that Jesus rose from the grave and calls us to be alive from the grave. I'm so thankful that I answered that call when I was seventeen years old. I was not raised in a Christian home; I did not grow up in the church. I had made a mess of my life and made some incredibly poor choices and already my life was on a destructive path. But God loved me, and Jesus called to me from outside of my grave of sin and death and I answered and started learning how to walk in different clothes. There are a hundred Bible verses that say we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

When Jesus calls us alive out of the grave of sin and death, we need to take off our grave clothes and put on his righteousness. We need to stop living like we're still dead! We need to be done with sin and death. We need to give ourselves completely to Jesus so that it is HIS life that lives out of us. The Apostle Paul said it this way:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20, niv)

Listen: *if the devil can't keep you dead in the grave, the next best thing is to keep you in your grave clothes.* Just like the grave represents sin and death, the grave clothes represent the unhealed remnants of the old sinful life including bad habits, damaged self-image, and every other negative influence that keeps you from living in spiritual freedom. If you've answered the call from Jesus to come out of the grave, why would you stay in your grave clothes – why would you keep thinking, acting, and living like your dead? It's keeping you from reaching your full potential and true freedom. It's keeping you from the glory of God that Jesus talked about for your life. You've avoided eternal death, but why would you want to keep living like you're dead? For heaven's sake, stop wearing clothes from the grave.

A minute ago I was talking to people here today who haven't answered Jesus' call to new life. Now I'm talking to those of us who have been believers for a while. If you are a Christian, listen: what if I were to ask this of those in this room who are not yet Christians: what if I asked them to look at your life and decide if they wanted to be Christian or not. What would they say? Would they see a person who is living a life free of sin and death, or would they say that's a person who looks just like all the non-Christians I know? Please: for the love of God: get outta those grave clothes! God has given you his own Holy Spirit so that the life of Jesus himself can live within you. Crucify yourself – put it to death – so the

true life of the resurrected Jesus Christ can live in you. You won't see Jesus wearing any grave clothes. You shouldn't either. You don't have to. Take. Them. off.

Prayer

Listen, I want to give you a chance to respond today. You've got one of two responses: either you are answering Jesus' call to you to come out of the grave, or you are getting out of those grave clothes. Either way, that's your choice. Today I want to give you the opportunity to step out in faith. Up here in the front I have baskets with strips of cloth in them. In just a minute, I'm going to invite you to stand, and to come forward and take one of these little strips. If you come up and get one of these, it will be your way of answering Jesus' call to you today to come out of the grave, or to take off the grave clothes.

Will you do it?

Let's stand, and when you want to, come get one of these and then take it back to your seat.

When done:

Keep this somewhere that you will see it and be reminded that Jesus called you out of the grave to be alive and that you are not going to keep wearing grave clothes.

A few things quickly:

First, if you accepted Jesus' call to come out of the grave – congratulations! You have been transformed from death to life, and you now have a new and abundant life ahead of you that won't stop even after you die. Now you need to be baptized. It's what we see in the Bible – the way to solidify your decision is to be baptized. Fill out a card and join us at 9am next Sunday for a class on baptism – what it is, how we do it, and then we'll have a baptism service on May 11.

Second, notice that Lazarus couldn't take off the grave clothes by himself. He needed the help of others. Jesus told the people around Lazarus to take off those grave clothes off of him. We all need a church to help us keep off the grave clothes. We need each other. Come to church regularly. Think about joining a small group.

Finally, and this is important: notice that Jesus worked in Laz's life on his own time. He didn't heal Laz in the way people wanted and in the time people wanted. There may still be healing from hurt that you are asking Jesus to do for you. He may not do it when you want him to. But what he does for you is always intentional and he has a plan and is the best timing, even if it doesn't make sense to you. That's what Jesus meant when he talked about the twelve hours of daytime. Jesus will do his work when the time is right. If Jesus doesn't heal or provide for you when you want him to, don't stop trusting him. He will do it when the time is right.