

I AM the Resurrection & the Life

MEG JENISTA

The great king, Solomon, said that there is nothing new under the sun, but on today's show we listen as Jesus declares something so radical, so new, that it is like the needle scratches on the record; it is like the tires squeal on the pavement. There is a break in the time/space continuum; there is a blip in the matrix. Here is something entirely new under the sun. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life."

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me again today as our guest co-host is Meg Jenista, pastor of the Third Christian Reformed Church of Kalamazoo, Michigan. Welcome, Meg.

MEG JENISTA

Thank you very much. I am looking forward to spending time with our listeners again.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is great to have you back, and what a great "I am" saying we have today to look at. We have been doing a series of program on these seven sayings from the Gospel of John: I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the door; I am the good shepherd; and today we come to John Chapter 11, and as you pointed out, something brand new – something totally new.

MEG JENISTA

And it is a great story; the whole story lays itself out as Jesus walks to the tomb of a friend and a loved one, and from that location speaks these incredible words.

DAVE BAST

²⁵"I am the resurrection and the life." What more is there to say? But, as you point out, it comes in the context of a funeral, almost, in effect; the story is told in some detail in the first part of John Chapter 11.

MEG JENISTA

Right; it starts with Jesus' friends, Mary and Martha, sending word to Jesus that their brother, Lazarus, who is one of Jesus' good friends, is lying sick, is about to die; and you would expect Jesus to jump up and to rally the troops and to go, but instead He sits and He waits, and it does not make sense that Jesus would wait. Jesus says:

⁴"The sickness will not end in death, but that it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

DAVE BAST

Yes, Jesus and His disciples are actually, we learn, on the other side of the Jordan River, so they are some distance away, and they are not really doing anything there; they are just sort of hanging out there; and so here comes this urgent message, and it is what we naturally do, right Meg, when we are in trouble – we call for God.

MEG JENISTA

Right – we jump in.

DAVE BAST

Yes: Hey, Jesus, come... It was interesting to me, on the news some time ago was a report about Hugo Chavez, the controversial president of Venezuela, and he is sort of a Socialist type, and almost a dictator; but now he has cancer, and when the medical treatment is not working he is crying out to God: Heal me. So of course, Mary and Martha call for their friend Jesus, who they know to be more than just a teacher.

MEG JENISTA

The trouble with this story, of course, is that Lazarus does die while Jesus seems to be doing nothing. The other factor is that Jesus' disciples were kind of relieved not to have to go up to Galilee. The last time they were up there, Jesus and their own lives were threatened by the authorities and the religious teachers in Galilee. So they were a bit relieved to stay far, far away.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and Jesus says to them: Lazarus has fallen asleep. So here is another strange thing. It is like He knows everything that is going on and still He does not rush to the bedside to provide healing, and when the disciples hear that, they misunderstand Him. They say, in their typical stupid way: Well, that is good for him, Lord. Won't he get better then? It is the healing balm of sleep. And then He says: No, Lazarus has died; but now let's go. Isn't it a little late, Jesus?

MEG JENISTA

Which is exactly what Martha says when Jesus arrives. She comes out to meet Him and she confronts Him with that. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

DAVE BAST

I cannot even begin to count how many times I have thought that, because I think that is our consistent assumption: If only God were with us – if only Jesus was there – there would be no sickness, there would be no trouble, there would be no suffering – because these things clearly are not God's will; and yet, in some profound way sometimes they are; you know, what do you make of that? That is kind of a fundamental pastoral question, isn't it, for us?

MEG JENISTA

Absolutely. I am just relieved in this story that Martha gets to say things that are right and true because in her other cameo appearance in scripture, she is written off as the one who gets it wrong, but she is exactly right: Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died; and then when Jesus says: He will be raised again, she is right again when she responds to Him by saying: I know he will be raised on the last day.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but that strikes me, and it always has, I think, as a kind of conventional theology. She says the right things like we say the right things. She does give vent to her frustration, her bewilderment: What is the matter, God? Why didn't You show up when I needed You? When I prayed so desperately? And then, she hears this reassurance: Well, your brother will rise again; and she replies: Yes, I believe that; I believe that. You know, by and by sometime – pie in the sky by and by; but Jesus says: No, that is not what I meant.

MEG JENISTA

And that is when we get into the heart of our text – that is where we get into John Chapter 11, beginning in verse 25:

Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in Me will live even though they die; ²⁶and whoever lives by believing in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷"Yes, Lord," she told Him, "I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world."

DAVE BAST

Well, it is really hard to do justice to those words, but you know, apparently simply believing in some conventional way in a future resurrection is not enough according to Jesus. As good as that is, it is not enough.

MEG JENISTA

Right; and it is a very important hope that we can have in the future, but Jesus is about to do something that brings the future into the present, that brings eternity into our time and our day and our moment. That is the promise of, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

DAVE BAST

One of the things that makes this whole conversation difficult, in this verse in particular, is that it seems to me that the meaning of *live* shifts a little bit back and forth. Sometimes Jesus clearly means it literally and sometimes not so literally, like when He says, “Whoever believes in Me will never die.” Life and death, in that sense, it is not literal because, I mean, we do die – we physically die, so there He is speaking of a kind of what, spiritual reality?

MEG JENISTA

I think so. I think it is a spiritual reality. It is the idea that... Well, in officiating funerals we often pray: Lord, help us to live as those who are prepared to die, so that when we die we will go forth to live. So that for the believer in Christ, there is a strange continuity between this life and the next. I think that is at the heart of the promise Jesus makes when He says, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

DAVE BAST

So, in one sense, to believe in Jesus is to gain a kind of life that cannot be lost.

MEG JENISTA

Sure; it is John 10:10: I have come that they may have life and that they may have it in abundance.

DAVE BAST

And even though we still pass through physical death, we are not destroyed by that, we continue to live. In that sense, it is true what Jesus promises; we will never die.

MEG JENISTA

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

But I think He is also talking about something that is literal when He means resurrection and promises life.

MEG JENISTA

Well, and we are going to see how literal He is when we travel with the mourners to Lazarus’ tomb.

DAVE BAST

Which comes next in the story, and we will get to it next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork; I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

And I am Meg Jenista. Today we are discussing Jesus’ promise in John 11 when He says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” This is a spiritual life, but also there is a very real, very literal meaning and

intention to Jesus' words.

DAVE BAST

Yes; He says: Whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. That is not literally true in a physical sense; so He is talking there about the new life, the life of the world to come; maybe we could say spiritual life, although that is kind of an overworked term; but He also says in this same promise: Whoever believes in Me, even though they die, yet will they live; and that I think He means literally; that He will, as He says again and again in the Gospel of John in particular, "I will raise them at the last day."

MEG JENISTA

But more than that in this story we walk with Jesus and the mourners and Mary and Martha to the tomb of Lazarus, where he has been laid for four days, and the text says that the body had begun to stink in that tomb, so the reality of death was so visceral – was so physical – in that moment.

DAVE BAST

It hits you in the face.

MEG JENISTA

It does!

DAVE BAST

It hits you in the nostrils, yes.

MEG JENISTA

And Jesus' response is a verse that many people are familiar with. We memorize it because it is the shortest one: Jesus wept. In the face of death, in the face of His friend's tomb, Jesus wept. What do we make of that?

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is sometimes difficult, I think, for people. Why did Jesus weep when He is standing there about to raise Lazarus from the dead? You know, one thing it makes me think of, somebody was sharing the phrase, pure humanity, earlier, and that really rings true for me, that this is Jesus simply being a real human being. Never mind speculating about what He knew or what He was about to do – although many have done that – but what do you do when someone whom you love deeply dies, and you find yourself there, standing by the grave? If you are human, you mourn, you grieve, you weep; and that is what Jesus did.

MEG JENISTA

And Jesus is the perfect example of humanity, which allows us to follow His example, to be saddened by death, to grieve at death; and yes, as Martha said, he will be raised at the last day, but right now this is hard; right now this is sad and this requires our grieving because death is not the way God intended the world to be.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely. Death is the last enemy, says the New Testament; and it is a terrible enemy. Just because we have profound hope and faith as Christians does not mean we have to somehow steel ourselves or pretend that we are stoics. That was the stoic way – kind of the Greek way – you would sort of, you know, stiff upper lip, as the British would say. Paul says this wonderful phrase in I Thessalonians 4: I want to tell you about the return of Christ so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope; which means, yes we grieve, but not hopelessly – not in the way of the stoic.

MEG JENISTA

And I think it is significant that you framed death as the enemy because when John Calvin comments on this story, he talks about the fact that Christ did not come to the grave as an idle spectator, but as a wrestler preparing for His match: Therefore, no wonder He weeps, for the violent rule of death that He must

overcome stands right before His eyes.

DAVE BAST

I love that! That is a great quote. I have never seen that before; but let me just read the verse because it is so interesting. He does more than He weeps. It says in verse 33 – John 11:33:

When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴“Where have you laid him?” He asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

³⁵Jesus wept. So, a couple of things here: He is moved by the grief of others – He is part of the community; and the other thing is that *deeply moved in spirit* phrase, literally, I remember reading that could be translated: He snorted. It is a word used of horses, you know.

MEG JENISTA

Right; He was angry.

DAVE BAST

He was mad! Yes, death is the enemy. Death is not this soothing end, naturally we all embrace it. You know, it is the wheel of nature, we all return... No!

MEG JENISTA

No, He is getting ready. It is like a team in the locker room psyching themselves up for the big game...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

MEG JENISTA

He is getting ready – He is digging in – He is saying: Come on, bring it!

DAVE BAST

He is angry because He sees what lies behind death, and that is sin; and it is the evil one. Death is all about the evil one. It belongs to his kingdom, not to God's kingdom. Sure, there is a profound mystery: How does God permit this to be in His world? Well, He is not going to put up with it forever.

MEG JENISTA

No; and the amazing thing about this story is that when the Pharisees leave the tomb that day, they begin to plot Jesus' death. So the price of freeing Lazarus from the tomb – the price for freeing any of us from death or the tomb is Jesus' own entrance into death and the grave.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a really good point, I think, because if we put this story in the context that John does, of the overall story of the Gospels, it is a kind of climax – it is a hinge point. On the one hand, it proves what Jesus promised: I am the resurrection and the life. It is like I always think of this character from one of Shakespeare's plays who boasts: I can call spirits from the vasty deep, and somebody else says to him: Well, so can I; so can anyone; but will they come when you call them? You know, it is easy to make promises. It is easy to make claims: I am the resurrection and the life – but Jesus proves it in His power to raise Lazarus. It is sort of a preview – sort of a parable – it is not the same thing. He does not really resurrect him to the life of the world to come, but it is an acted-out parable; but at the same time, this becomes the last straw for Jesus' enemies because they say: If He is doing that sort of thing everybody is going to flock to Him. We had better get rid of Him now. Now is the time.

MEG JENISTA

But what sort of thing did Jesus do? At this point, all He has done is make claims and promises; so in the next segment, let's see what it is that Jesus did to bring His promise to life.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

This is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

And I am Meg Jenista. Today we are looking at the story from John 11, where Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life,” but after making this claim the story continues:

³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹And Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” “But, Lord,” said Martha, (and this is the part we talked about earlier) by this time, there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

DAVE BAST

Yes; in other words, there is no question about what has happened here.

MEG JENISTA

He is dead – dead is dead.

DAVE BAST

This is very realistic, yes.

MEG JENISTA

⁴⁰Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” ⁴³And then Jesus called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” ⁴⁴And 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.”

DAVE BAST

What a story. I love the comment of one of the ancient Church Fathers who said: If Jesus had not specified Lazarus when He said, “Come out,” every grave within earshot would have been emptied; that is the power of Jesus on display here.

MEG JENISTA

That is wonderful.

DAVE BAST

You know, He says earlier in John Chapter 5, “The hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of Man and they will come out of their graves.” This is a preview of the last day – this is the most powerful illustration ever of what lies ahead; even though, as we said, too, this is not quite *the* resurrection, but still it is kind of an acted-out parable in the case of Lazarus.

MEG JENISTA

And it has implications for our future hope, but it also has implications for our life today. One of the resources available to me in my tradition is the Heidelberg Catechism. It is a document provided to teach us about the faith, and it asks the question: How does Christ’s resurrection benefit us? And it says three things: First, by His resurrection He has overcome death so that He might make us share in the righteousness He won for us by His death. Second, by His power we too are already now resurrected to a new life. Third, Christ’s resurrection is a guarantee of our own glorious resurrection.

DAVE BAST

You cannot say fairer than that. What a profound description of the power of Christ, and what it means for us as it is on display here: I am the resurrection and the life. You know, I like that idea: Death is a defeated enemy. That is, again, a great New Testament theme. You think of Paul in I Corinthians 15: O, death, where is thy sting? O, grave, where is thy victory? Death is like a scorpion that has had its sting taken out; and it guarantees our future resurrection as well; but maybe we could focus for just a few minutes on that middle

statement, that it gives us something here and now.

MEG JENISTA

That section gets lost a little bit; not just because it is placed in the middle, but because of our own thinking about life and resurrection, and we have a glorious hope in the future; but the sentence says that by God's power we too are already now resurrected to new life.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and Jesus put it in the present tense: I *am* the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in Me will never die. There is a present resurrection. I think of Eugene Peterson's book, *Practice Resurrection*. Our life as Christians here and now is we are practicing resurrection.

MEG JENISTA

Right, because in our baptism we are united with Christ – we are united to His death, but we are also united to His resurrection, which means we already now live a new life.

DAVE BAST

So think about it in the context of this great story of the raising of Lazarus. "Lazarus, come forth," Get out of the grave – get out of your tomb; and then He says this wonderful touch to the bystanders: Hey, let the grave clothes loose – because, of course, Lazarus would have been sort of, if I can picture it, I mean, inching his way out, bound hand and foot as they did in preparing the corpse for burial. What do you think of when you think of, "Let those grave clothes loose?"

MEG JENISTA

Take off the grave clothes and go. I think that is a wonderful commandment for our discipleship; as we think about our own lives and we recognize the fact that we have been resurrected already now to new life, then we look at our lives and we see the grave clothes, whatever they may be. It may be an addiction. That is a grave cloth that God has allowed us to take off so that we might go forth.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a binding that we need to kind of claim the power to overcome. I know it is not simplistic – it is not easy, I know from my own experience with sin, but some of us are too comfortable...

MEG JENISTA

With the grave clothes!

DAVE BAST

Sort of lying in death, yes, instead of showing that resurrection life forth.

MEG JENISTA

It might be a good question as you get to the end of your day or as you are preparing for a new day, as you are making confession or you are thinking about your life: Where are the grave clothes? What is it that you are asking me to get rid of? Not because it is good and I need to sacrifice for You, but because it binds me – because it constricts me – and it holds me back from the new life in which I am resurrected.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and maybe it is a behavior, maybe it is a memory, maybe it is something out of your past that you just cannot seem to shed. The Lord says, "Come forth; come out of that." Let the dead bury their dead, as Jesus said on another occasion. We need to rise to this new life. We need to be living the new life through the power of His Spirit.

MEG JENISTA

Take off your grave clothes and go.

DAVE BAST

So, whatever it is; maybe you need to talk to a friend. Perhaps they can help you to be unbound like Lazarus' friends did with him; but whatever it is, we trust that you know and believe that great question we come back to, and I think it is at the heart of this story: Martha, do you believe this? Do you really believe I am the resurrection and the life? That I can give you new life; I cannot just give you a hope for the future for heaven, but here and now.

MEG JENISTA

And if you believe, take off your grave clothes and go.

DAVE BAST

Amen! Well thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future Groundwork programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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