

Home at Last: The Ultimate Reunion

WITH MIKE TUCKER

The summer I turned 16 the conflict in Vietnam was raging. But as a teenager who was still too young for the draft, I had a fairly carefree summer.

My family lived in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas where summers are hot and humid, so I spent quite a bit of time at a public swimming pool.

I remember running into a gentleman who was probably in his 50's who was cooling off in the pool as well. We started a conversation. I noticed he was wearing a high school class ring but the year embedded in the ring was too recent for it to belong to him. I mentioned the ring and he told me it belonged to his son.

The tears started to flow as he told me about the son who had died in Vietnam. He spoke of his bravery, his devotion to country and duty, and his love for his fellow soldiers. His son had hopes and dreams once he was finished with his military service – hopes and dreams he never got a chance to realize.

As the man spoke of what he knew of the battle where his son died the tears flowed freely. "I miss him so much! I only wish I could see him one more time – just to be able to hug his neck once more – that is all I would ask for."

The man's grief was overwhelming. His sorrow knew no bounds. His pain was almost too much to handle.

Perhaps you've lost someone as well. You know well the pain that grief brings. But is there any hope beyond the grave?

As a pastor and chaplain I have had the privilege of speaking with hundreds of people who were facing the immediate reality of their own mortality. For many of these people, death remains an enigma – a riddle with no answer.

The legend has it that the sphinx, a creature half woman and half lion, used to lie stretched upon a rock at the entrance to a city. And when anyone would approach the city, she would put a riddle.

The riddle was this: What goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs at night? And if the traveler could not answer the riddle, and none could, she would push that traveler over the cliff.

Then one day Oedipus came, and Oedipus answered the riddle. What goes on four legs in the morning and two at noon and three at night? Man.

In the morning of his years, he crawls on all fours. In the noontime of his life, the middle years, he walks upon his two feet. At the end of his years, he walks upon two legs and a cane, when night draws near.

And the story goes that when the sphinx heard the explanation of the riddle, she was so ashamed that she herself leaped to her death.

Death has been the sphinx that has been stretched out across the pathway of all our human experience. Death has been the riddle, the enigma, put to us that no one could answer.

But then came Jesus. And in Jesus we see death itself die. We see the last great enemy defeated.

I find a story from the life of Jesus to be very informative on this subject. Open your Bible to John, the 11th chapter.

Home at Last: The Ultimate Reunion

WITH MIKE TUCKER

Whenever Jesus went to Jerusalem, he rarely spent the night in the city. Instead, each evening he would walk just a couple of miles down the road to a town called Bethany, where some of his dearest friends lived. Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, always welcomed Jesus as a houseguest. These three believed fully in Jesus and his divinity.

Once when Jesus was on one of his speaking tours, a messenger reached him with news that Lazarus was very sick, even at the point of death. But Jesus didn't respond immediately. Let's pick the story up in verse 4.

John 11:4-7 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." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

Jesus waited two days before he left for Bethany. The disciples must have wondered at his behavior since they knew how much he loved Lazarus. Jesus said something quite curious about Lazarus in verse 11.

John 11:11-15 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."

I find it curious that Jesus called death a "sleep." Only reluctantly did Jesus use the word, "dead." It was his custom to refer to death as "sleep."

By the time Jesus and the disciples arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for 4 days. Jesus' delay insured that Lazarus was not only dead, but had already been buried for some time.

Four days was significant because some Jews believed that the soul stayed near the dead body for 3 days, in hopes of returning to it. Lazarus was dead four days, removing all hope in their minds. He was irrevocably dead.

Jesus removed all room for doubt of the miracle He planned to perform by waiting 4 days. Upon Jesus' arrival, Martha came out to meet him. But it was not all sweetness and light with Martha. There is at least a hint of bitterness in her voice. Listen to this conversation.

John 11:20-24 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...."

Home at Last: The Ultimate Reunion

WITH MIKE TUCKER

(Can you catch just a taste of sarcasm here? “If you had come when I called you, none of this would have happened!” But she continues as she softens her tone just a bit.)

“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.”

When did Martha expect to see her brother again? At the last day in the resurrection!

The Bible teaches that when Jesus returns, those who died trusting in Him will be raised from the dead. This happens at the Second Coming of Jesus. That was when Martha expected to see her brother again.

She didn’t say, “I’ll see him in heaven when I die,” but she said, “I’ll see him again in the resurrection.” This is a key point.

Now Jesus addressed the real issue regarding death in verse 25.

John 11:25-27 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

Martha expressed faith that Lazarus would one day rise in the resurrection. Jesus responded, “I AM the resurrection and the life.” He’s saying, “You believe in resurrection, well, you are standing in the presence of resurrection – in the presence of life.”

How incredible, if she had truly understood that standing beside her was the one who had flung the stars in space, created the very ground she stood on, actually breathed life into Adam. He knew about life! Jesus not only is life, but He conveys life to those who believe so that death will never triumph over them.

Mary heard that Jesus had arrived and she too went to Jesus and said that He could have prevented Lazarus’ death.

Jesus asked to be taken to Lazarus’ grave. When he arrived, Jesus cried – not for Lazarus since he knew that he was about to raise him to life – Jesus wept for the world, for the pain and for the disbelief. Jesus wept for us.

Then Jesus went into action.

People were buried in hollowed out places in rock with a very large stone rolled over the entrance to the tomb. Jesus stood in front of that stone and gave a command.

John 11:39-44 “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.”

Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

Home at Last: The Ultimate Reunion

WITH MIKE TUCKER

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.”

What we call death, Jesus calls sleep – and he almost never refers to the sleep of death without mention of resurrection. For Jesus holds the keys to death.

Several things about this story are important.

First, Jesus says that death is a “sleep,” a period of unconsciousness that eventually will be interrupted on resurrection. We find this elsewhere in Scripture. The author of Ecclesiastes says:

Ecclesiastes 9:5 ⁵For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.

If when we die we go to heaven then that would be a reward. Here it says we don’t get our reward when we die. The reward happens, as we will see later, when Jesus comes.

The psalmist tells us that when a person dies, that very day their thoughts cease and they do not continue to make plans. The psalmist describes death through the euphemism, “When their spirit departs.”

Psalm 146:4 ⁴When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing.

When we die, we don’t go directly to heaven. We sleep, stop thinking, and know nothing.

It is interesting to note what Lazarus didn’t do and didn’t say when Jesus brought him back to life.

First, he didn’t complain about leaving heaven. If Lazarus had been in heaven for four days, and then had to come back, don’t you think he would have been unhappy with that? Four days of paradise would be just enough to let you know that you don’t want to live here any more. But Lazarus didn’t complain.

He also didn’t tell people what heaven was like. Don’t you think he would have stories if he has spent four days in heaven? He didn’t say anything about heaven because he hadn’t seen it.

Even Jesus, when he died, didn’t go to heaven directly. He said so three days later when, after his resurrection he told the disciples not to touch him since he had not yet been to see the Father who is in heaven.

Home at Last: The Ultimate Reunion

WITH MIKE TUCKER

So this tells us that death is a time of darkness and sleep where the dead don't know anything, are not aware of anything, have no thoughts, and don't get their reward. Death's slumber is interrupted only by resurrection.

But the most important thing is that Jesus has power over the grave and death. He will not leave those who trust in him in the grave. Just as Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave, so too, will he raise all those who trust in Him when He returns.

The Apostle Paul tells us this.

1Thessalonians 4:13-18 ¹³Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. ¹⁴We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Notice that the dead are raised to life at the Second Coming of Jesus. Jesus will shout at the top of his lungs and call forth all those who died trusting Him.

What this means is incredible.

First, it means that you need not fear death, for death is not the end. You will live again, for this is the promise of Jesus. He came that you might have life and have it to the fullest. He promised that you would live forever with Him.

Second, if your heart has ever been broken through the grief that comes from losing a loved one to death, the day will come when the tears will be dried from your eyes. For the day of resurrection is a day of reunion. If your loved one trusted in Jesus, then you will see them again, and then you will never part again for then, no one will ever die.

Third, this tells us the most incredible thing. Jesus loves you far more than you could ever imagine.

We have already learned that Jesus loves you too much to let you live alone. That's why he longs to live in you and with you and to have you live in Him. He has promised to be with you always.

This also tells us that you will not die alone. Jesus promises to never leave you or forsake you – not even when death draws near.

I've worked as a chaplain for hospice and hospitals, and I've attended over 500 deaths. People do not die the same way. Some die with fear and others die with hope.

Those who trust in Jesus do not die alone. They die knowing that they will live again. Jesus loves you too much to let you die alone.

But also, Jesus loves you too much to leave you in the grave. That's why he speaks so often of resurrection. There would be no need for resurrection if when we die we go to

Home at Last: The Ultimate Reunion

WITH MIKE TUCKER

heaven. We would already be there! But since death is a sleep, Jesus reassures us that we will not sleep forever. He will come and awaken us and take us home.

We began this talk with the story of Mark Twain. His losses left him bitter, pessimistic.

We need not lose hope. Jesus says that this life is not all we have. This life is just a shadow – a brief introduction to the reality which is to follow. That reality is eternity with Jesus.

Death is not the end. Jesus enables us to see through the grave, all the way to eternity.

I've often told the story of a mother and father whose young daughter died. The mother was a Christian, but the father was not.

At the funeral the father passed by the casket and in bitter tears cried, "Good by! I'll never see you again!" He turned and walked away, a man without hope.

But the mother came by the grave and said, "Good night sweetheart. Mommy will see you in the morning."

The difference is Jesus. Jesus loves us too much to let us live alone, He loves us too much to let us die alone, and He loves us too much to leave us in the grave.

Death is not the final word. Resurrection and reunion are the words that matter.