

## John 11:17-26, Life After death?

Sun.20/07/25

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?’ (Jn.11:17-26 NIV)

### Introduction

Ever been in a conversation where you think you are talking about one thing but discover the other person is talking about something else? You both are wondering whether it was you or the other person misunderstood.

This happens to Martha when talking to Jesus...just as it had to Nicodemus (see John 3) and did to most people when talking to Jesus. Bear that in mind as we explore this conversation between Martha and Jesus.

### Life after death?

The sermon is titled ‘life after death?’ not as a statement but as a question.

When Martha confirms to Jesus that she knows her brother, who has died, will rise again in the resurrection, the word ‘resurrection’ hits us as a complicated word. The Good News Bible has Martha saying, ‘I know ... he will rise to life’ (Jn11:24 GNB). From that we might think that Martha and Jesus are talking about life after death, but they’re not!

Well – Martha *is* talking about life after death, but Jesus is giving a deeper and bigger picture. Many people who read or hear this conversation only understand Martha’s view and that’s probably because the phrase that a person will rise to life is so much easier and, even if we use the word ‘resurrection’ we think it means the same thing, e.g., we live on Earth, die and then rise to new life.

But that is not what Jesus means. The good news is that his meaning is not as hard to understand as we might think. What Jesus is talking about is, as Tom Wright remarks, ‘life after life after death’.<sup>i</sup>

It’s a great phrase that mirrors how the New Testament explains heaven, also called ‘the kingdom of God’ but I do need to tell you how to understand it. Let’s pop back into the encounter between Martha and Jesus...

### Martha’s Complaint

‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ (v21)

Martha starts by having a moan at Jesus - she complains. She is saying, 'it's not fair, we have a special relationship with you, Lazarus was a great guy who loved you like a brother, and you weren't here when we needed you. He's dead and you're too late!'

But as she is speaking her own respect, love and hope in Jesus manages to surface through the pain of losing her brother and she adds, 'But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.' (v.22)

At first, she does not understand the comfort Jesus offers her when he talks of Lazarus rising again and, sad that Jesus does not appear to be of mind to bring Lazarus back to life now, she prepares her heart to help with her grief by admitting Lazarus will have life after death.

This is where many of us stop thinking and adopt Martha's 'live, die, live again' understanding so that when Jesus replies to correct Martha, we also miss the correction and think his next statement simply confirms it.

No – it does not!

First, Jesus is making a huge statement on who he is, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (v25). The two names of 'resurrection' and 'life' are two different things.

He explains those two different terms in the next part of his sentence

"The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

**The Resurrection ...** '... will live even though they die'

In the first part of his sentence, he is talking about the resurrection. We have the benefit of knowing what happens to Jesus. We know that he dies – his body ceases to work. But we also know that when his body stopped working Jesus did not, for Matthew tells us how Jesus then goes to the place of the dead, calls out to them and they rise to follow him. (see Matt.28:51) As we discovered last week John uses the picture of Jesus being the Shepherd to say, 'his sheep hear his voice' (See John 10:3-5) and this is given dramatic effect in Matthew's account of the dead rising to life. We also know Jesus bodily rose again, meeting the women and other disciples from the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. (see John 20)

Jesus is the resurrection; he is the first of the resurrection and because of that his people have life after death.

Ok, so that confirms our initial understanding – or rather, we think it does because we are still using Martha's understanding of the conversation. Let's get Jesus' bigger picture...

**And the Life ...** 'whoever lives by believing in me will never die'

The second part of Jesus' sentence does not simply confirm the first but adds new meaning. I hope you are ready for it...

Here, Jesus says that those who live in him will never die. He is talking about eternal life, but not as starting in the future when the body dies but immediately when the person believes and follows Jesus. (see John 3:36)

Go back to Jesus' first words to Martha, 'your brother will rise again.' Notice that he says 'again'. Let me ask you this, when was the first time?

...was it when he was born? I submit that doesn't fit. Think back to Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus where Jesus says you must be born again, born of the Spirit. (see John.3:3-5) That fits much better with the phrase about rising again. Jesus always gives a bigger picture.

Martha's brother had already risen to eternal life when he believed and followed Jesus.

Eternal life for a follower of Christ begins when they accept Jesus' call to follow him, and him only. That's when their eternal life in God's Kingdom begins and they are rescued from death.

Here we need a reminder...the biblical meaning of death is separation from God, who is life. Tom Wright again, 'The Christian has, according to the New Testament already passed from death to life'.<sup>ii</sup>

So, to confirm 'life after death' starts when a person becomes a follower of Jesus. Before that they were dead, spiritually dead. Being born again is that start of 'life after death'.

Life after that – e.g., when the body, the fleshy shell suit, dies, is what Jesus is teaching Martha, the resurrection life.

'Life after'... 'life after death'

Jesus said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life"

I leave you with two questions, First Jesus' one to Martha, '**Do you believe this?**'

Second, if you do believe, then **what are you going to do with the life after death you have already been given?**

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<sup>i</sup> Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2011), p.210.

<sup>ii</sup> Wright, p.21.