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COMPARED TO SPACE MOUNTAIN…

John 11:17-57

Life is never boring for me because with Laurie you never know what is going to happen next. On our most recent trip to the cancer center she did it again. We had to go to the restroom. When I was done I waited outside the women’s restroom for her to come out. It took longer than I expected. She finally came out laughing. I said, “Okay, what did you do now?” She told me that the faucet was one of those deals where you push down on the knob to get water to come out, but when she was done the hot water just kept flowing. She didn’t want to just leave it running, so she tried to pull the knob back up, but it popped off completely, with the water still running. She tried to put it back on and pull it up again, but it wasn’t working. She kept trying, but it wasn’t working. Soon another woman came in and was observing her futile efforts. Finally, the woman said, “Is that your husband waiting outside?” Laure said it was. The woman said, “Maybe you ought to just go. Besides, you don’t look like a plumber.” Laurie agreed and gave up, but did so laughing. Like I said, there are often surprises with Laurie.

I tell you that because in a small way it reminds me of Jesus. He was the King of surprises. Start with his birth, which was filled with surprises. That continued throughout his life. You could never tell what he was going to do next. Only his surprises were on a much larger scale. Today we are going to see him pull off something absolutely no one expected. What he did changes everything about life. Let’s look at John 11:17-57.

JESUS CLAIMED TO BE THE RESURRECTION

Jesus arrived at the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary after hearing of Lazarus’ illness. By the time he got there, Lazarus had already been in a tomb 4 days. Bethany, where the family lived, was a bit less than 2 miles from Jerusalem. Lazarus and his sisters apparently were a well known, influential family, so many of the leading citizens of Jerusalem had come to mourn with the family.

When Jesus showed up, Martha immediately went to him and said, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” I don’t think she intended this as a rebuke. It took longer for Jesus to come than she and Mary expected because Jesus had delayed for 2 days. However, Martha knew that no matter what Jesus did, he could not have made it back to Bethany before Lazarus died. Their brother was probably already dead by the time Jesus got the message that his friend was seriously ill. I believe Martha was just confirming her faith in Jesus. She believed he had the power to heal, and he could have healed Lazarus if he had only known what was happening. She was lamenting the fact that they couldn’t get word to Jesus in time for him to save her brother.

She added, “I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” Again she’s affirming her confidence in Jesus. I think she is hinting that she even thinks he might have the power to bring Lazarus back, but that was so impossible that she wouldn’t even ask that. In her mind, death was the end of the story. Once her brother died nothing could be done.

Jesus said to Martha, “Your brother will live again.” She responded by saying, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” I think she took Jesus’ statement to be the kind of thing people say at funerals. A couple of weeks ago one of Toby’s and Anna’s many dogs died. Okay, they only had 3, but 3 dogs mixed in with 4 kids seemed like a massive horde of dogs in the house. I said to Laurie that the dog, Koa, was “in a better place.” In her case, I didn’t mean she’d gone to heaven. Koa had a lot of issues. She suffered from a serious case of anxiety, among other things. The vet said she was not a happy dog and she had a lot of mental problems. She had actually been on some medicines for her psychological issues. I didn’t know that dogs had mental problems. I should have, because earlier Toby and Anna had a dog that had some big time issues. I think the official diagnosis was that he was crazy. Anyway, when I said Koa was in a better place, I just meant she’s not dealing with the chaos of a house with 4 kids and 3 dogs and filled with anxiety and fear. At least it’s quiet and peaceful where she is.

That’s the kind of thing people say at funerals. He’s in a better place. He’s at peace. I’m pretty sure that’s the kind of thing Martha understood Jesus to be doing. The cliché thing to do when a deeply loved relative has passed away was to say, “The good news is, he’s not gone forever. He will live again.” However, Jesus was not offering up polite cliches. He made the profound claim, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die, and whoever lives believing in me will never die.”

The second sentence seems confusing. Those who believe in Jesus will live even though they die, but if they believe in him they will never die. That sounds contradictory. They’ll live even if they die, but they’ll never die. There is another way to translate the last part of that verse that makes Jesus’ meaning more clear. I believe it should read, “Every one who lives and believes in me will not die eternally.” In other words, someone who believes in Jesus and dies will live again when they are resurrected, because those who believe in Jesus will not die in the eternal sense of being separated from God forever if they do die physically.

The key statement is that first one. “I am the resurrection and the life.” Yes, Martha was right, Lazarus would be raised from the dead. Like most of her people in that day Martha believed in the resurrection of God’s people. But the key fact is that Jesus is the resurrection. As he said, what guarantees some day living again even after one died is believing in Jesus. Martha and Mary both believed that God would give eternal life to people, that he would some day raise them from the dead. What they had not known for certain until that day was that the determining factor in that equation was faith in Jesus. Martha responded that she knew that Jesus is the Messiah. That was a way of saying she believed that what Jesus said was true. She believed that the key to eternal life is believing in Jesus.

JESUS BACKED UP HIS CLAIM

Martha went and got Mary to tell her that Jesus had come and was asking for her. When Mary went to meet Jesus, people thought she was going to the tomb to mourn, so the crowd followed her. There was a sizeable crowd of people there to mourn Lazarus. What a scene that must have been. A few years ago I read in a book by Stu Webber some comments about a man he knew who was a truly godly pastor, a great man he highly respected. He had been treated poorly by a church, and he ended up leading a very small church. When he died a small number of people showed up at his funeral. Webber said he was saddened by how little notice was taken of this man’s passing because he deserved better.

In the first century no one wanted that to happen to their loved ones who were deceased. The practice was that even poor families would hire professional mourners when a loved one died. When I read that I thought about what a job that would be. The pro mourners who would be most in demand likely would be those who put on the best show and wailed the loudest. How would you like to be a professional wailer?

I bring this up because it reminds us that it would have been quite a scene when Mary went out to meet Jesus, and it has to do with Jesus’ emotional response. Mary repeated pretty much what her sister said. I have no doubt they had conversations in the previous couple of days in which they said to each other, “If only Jesus had been here. He could easily have healed our brother.”

The whole thing had to have been a devastating experience. They watched their brother slowly getting worse. They had tried everything they knew to help him, but at some point they knew they needed a miracle. Only Jesus could supply it. How painful it must have been for them to wait day after day as their brother got worse and worse, and Jesus didn’t show up. How sad for them, how frustrating, when the day came when it was too late. Lazarus died, as they had feared, before Jesus got there. They didn’t know what was happening. Jesus couldn’t call them or send a text, or even a telegram. All they knew was that when he got there the game was over.

Jesus asked to be taken to Lazarus’ tomb. When he got there according to verse 35 he broke into tears. That’s the favorite verse of every kid who has been in Sunday School when they had a Bible memorization contest. Who can memorize the most verses? Well, I start with John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” That one is pretty easy to memorize.

The crowd, seeing Jesus crying, said, “See how he loved him.” Jesus did love Lazarus. But it is likely that’s not why he was crying. He knew what he was going to do. I suspect he was crying for the sadness the death brings. Yes, to Lazarus, but to his whole family and to all the people there who were grieving over Lazarus. I have been in numerous situations, unfortunately, where I have shed tears because of the terrible grief of people I love who had lost a loved one. It is painful to be with people who hurt terribly. Jesus felt that hurt and wept with those who were weeping.

But then Jesus did what I have wished that I could do, but he is God, and I absolutely am not, just in case you were wondering. He told them to remove the huge stone that covered the entrance to the tomb. Martha, ever the good homemaker, said this was a bad idea because the smell of the decomposing corpse would be horrific. Then Jesus spoke some profound words. “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” He prayed, then called out, “Lazarus, come out.” I have no doubt that there were some there who were thinking, “That’s awful. How could you be so unkind? How do you think it makes the family feel to do something like that when you know full well Lazarus is gone?”

They didn’t think that very long, because Lazarus did exactly what Jesus told him to do. Wrapped almost mummy-like in linen cloths, he shuffled his way out of that tomb! Jesus did the unimaginable. Martha and Mary wouldn’t even suggest that Jesus bring their brother back to life, because they knew that was impossible. Death is a one way street. There are no U turns on the street called Dead. There are many stories today of people who have technically died, and have been resuscitated. This was not that. Those are called near death experiences, because they are near being dead. But when one is truly dead and has been for several days, there is no coming back. Everyone knew that. But Jesus had walked on water. That is impossible. He turned water into wine. That’s not possible. He told a storm to stop being a storm, and it obeyed him. That’s not possible. He made a man blind from birth able to see. That was not possible. He fed a crowd of 10,000 people with 2 fish sandwiches. That wasn’t possible. In this case, he did the most impossible thing of all, he brought a man who had been dead for 4 days back to life.

IMPLICATIONS

JESUS’ POWER OVR DEATH:

GIVES US HOPE

First we have to accept that Jesus actually did demonstrate power over death in the case of Lazarus. There are many people who reject the authenticity of this story. The most common claim is that this was a legend that was added on to the story of Jesus many years after he lived. It was tacked on a couple of centuries later. Many insist this had to be the case for the simple reason that bringing a dead person back to life is impossible. This is just a myth or legend because it can’t happen.

John wrote his biography of Jesus probably some time around 80 AD, or possibly 85. He would have been very old. There is a manuscript in a museum in England that contains some of the Gospel of John. This manuscript was found in Egypt in 1934. It is agreed that it dates to about 125 AD. When you hear someone claiming that this story was a legend that developed over centuries, you can know that person is either unaware of the facts or is dishonest and purposely choosing to ignore them. Having a manuscript dated that close to the time of the original writing is astounding. It proves that John finished his Gospel before the end of the first century. There was no time for a legend about Lazarus to develop.

John wrote this story when eyewitnesses to the events were still alive. Not many, but some. There are people who claim that the story that the USA was able to land men on the moon 50 years ago was a hoax. It never happened. Here’s the problem with that conspiracy theory. I was alive then. I watched it happen. I have vivid and clear memories of those events. I can tell you exactly where I was when Neil Armstrong exited the Lunar Excursion Module and stepped onto the surface of the moon for that very first time. Well, Rick, you saw it on TV. You’ve also seen Superman fly on TV. They used special effects to make it look like they landed on the moon. Well, now you’ve got some other problems. You have to believe that all 12 men who walked on the moon lied about it, and you have to believe that thousands of people who were in on the conspiracy all kept their mouths shut and never told the truth. That would be a much bigger miracle than putting men on the moon. Oh, and let’s not forget, now you have to explain where all those moon rocks came from. We know it happened, because we watched it, even though it has been 50 plus years, our memories of it are quite clear.

Well, John sold that story to gullible, superstitious people who believed in things like people rising from the dead. Notice verse 45. “Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.” Do you notice anything curious about that? John said many who saw what happened believed in Jesus. Many, but not all. Even after seeing this astounding event some people refused to believe in Jesus. How could that be? They simply did not think such a thing was possible. Had to be a trick. Some couldn’t believe because it was just not possible to give life to a dead man, and some didn’t believe because they didn’t want to believe Jesus had that kind of power.

Laurie bought a cute decoration for our home for Independence Day. It had 3 wooden rectangular blocks, painted red, white and blue. Sitting on top of the blocks was an old style wooden pickup truck painted blue, carrying an American flag. On the side of the truck painted in white was “Since 1776.” On the side of the blocks were the words, “God bless America.” It was very patriotic and festive. Perfect for the 4th of July. Well, almost perfect. It had one flaw. One morning last week more than a week after Julyb4 as we were eating breakfast Laurie said, “Oh, my goodness. Look at that.” I said, “Look at what?” She pointed to the little decoration and said, “Do you see anything wrong with that?” I looked at itnd saw nothing. She said, Look at the word America.” I realized that the lower case letter “r” in America was upside down, so it looked like an “L.” So it actually appeared to say, “God bless Amelica.” That thing had sat in our house for almost 2 weeks before we noticed it. How could we have not noticed that? We saw what we expected to see. We expected to see “God bless America,” and that’s what we saw. I know, you’re thinking we must be dumber than a box of rocks. Perhaps, but we’re not alone. Laurie posted a picture of it on Facebook and asked, “Does anyone notice anything wrong with this? Only one person saw it. Everyone else saw “God bless America” because that was what they expected.

There were people at that home of Lazarus and his sisters who not only did not believe in Jesus, they were fervently opposed to him. First, they did not believe raising a man from the grave was possible, second they absolutely did not believe Jesus had divine power. They saw what they expected and wanted to see. They saw what, in their minds, could only have been an elaborate hoax. The people John wrote to were not a bunch of gullible simpletons. They weren’t quick to buy whatever “magic” trick the latest shyster was trying to sell. They were intelligent people who did not think rising from the grave was possible. The whole point of Jesus doing this was to do the impossible. It wouldn’t have had much impact if what Jesus did was set and splint a broken leg. That would be nice, but all it would prove is he might be a good doctor like many others. Jesus’ intent was to show that he had miraculous, divine power, and that required that he do the impossible.

This is a hugely important event, one whose message would be even more strengthened a few weeks later when Jesus himself came out of a grave. It means that the grave is not the end of the story for us. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. There is hope. This is not wishful thinking, trying to make us feel better when faced with the inevitable tragic end of life for every one of us. It is hope founded on an event in history that involved real, flesh and blood people.

The past almost a year has been a difficult odyssey for Laurie and me. Last year after several months of uncertainty I was finally given ominous news. I had malignant melanoma. I have done funerals for people that died from that. It was an scary diagnosis. A couple of weeks after the diagnosis I was put through several medical scans. I knew what they were looking for. They were seeking to find out how bad this was. Had it spread to my internal organs? If so, the outlook was not good. It was a very anxious moment when we met with the oncologist to go over those results. I knew it was entirely possible that I was about to receive what could amount to a death sentence. In that situation there are some things that are very clear. The biggest of them is that Jesus having power over death, being the resurrection and the life, is the most important reality in all of life. In my case, that meeting went as well as I could have hoped. The cancer had not spread to my internal organs. There is hope it can be defeated. But a moment like that gets you very much in touch with the reality that you’re not going to live forever. That day when you are finished on the planet is going to come.

For much of the past year I have had many visits to the cancer center and to various doctors. Every one of them is a reminder that life is uncertain. I’d like to just close my eyes and ignore all of this. Just stop going to treatments and quit seeing doctors and having tests. Maybe it will all just go away. But it won’t just go away. I have to deal with it, because it is all too real.

We know it is going to come for all of us. There’s no way around it. People are increasingly desperate to somehow avoid that day. Tech billionaires Jeff Bezos, Larry Ellison, Larry Page and Peter Thiel have all begun investing huge sums of money in the effort to find a cure for aging and death. The Saudis have committed $1 billion annually in research to find an answer to aging. Lorna Harries, a professor of molecular genetics at the University of Exeter in England, leads a team that made news recently when they actually were able to use chemicals to rejuvenate senescent cells. It was the first experiment that seemed to actually reverse aging in human cells.

Yeah, uh, could you guys hurry up please? I don’t know what, if anything, will come from all those efforts to somehow defeat aging. But at some point they will fail. We can’t make people live forever. The late Ray Stedman wrote, “You can jog, you can avoid cholesterol, you can watch your health, and you will end up with the healthiest corpse that ever died.” My most recent infusion 11 days ago began, as they always do, with a nurse taking my vital signs. After she got my weight, pulse rate, oxygen saturation and blood pressure she said, “Wow, why are you even here?” Apparently she was astounded by how healthy I seemed to be. All my blood markers were also spot on. And I have a disease that could kill me. I could end up being the healthiest corpse that has ever died.

That’s the final reality. It makes all the difference to know that this life is not all there is. There is resurrection and life. Nothing, and I mean nothing, compares with that. 1 Thessalonians 4:14 says, “We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” So Paul, facing the possibility of death, wrote in Philippians 1:21, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Dying is gain! It gets better! If you believe in Christ when you die you actually will be in a better place. It will be a massive improvement in your circumstances. You will be upgraded. If you were checking into a resort for a vacation and they said, “I have good news. We have upgraded you to our finest suite,” would you tremble in fear? No, you would be happy.

So Paul also wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:55, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” It is gone. If it doesn’t sting, then it won’t hurt us! I just this week read an article about a swarm of jelly fish stinging many people in Hawaii. The article said this happens there on a predictable schedule for about 3 days a month. I hate jelly fish. But what if they couldn’t sting? I wouldn’t care about them at all. Paul said death can’t sting us. So no need to care about it.

CHANGES OUR OUTLOOK ON LIFE

One of Laurie’s favorite verses in the Bible is in this passage. In verse 40 Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” They certainly did that day. That is a truth we need to live by every moment of our lives. Jesus has power even over death. What else are we ever going to face that is as ominous as death? There is nothing. Jesus said if we will believe, we will see the glory of God, even in the face of death. That is true in everything else. Whatever else we face in life, it will not be as big and ominous as death.

My Dad was never a fan of roller coasters. Many years ago when he was still alive our whole family went to Disneyland. At one point we wanted to go on Space Mountain. We suggested that since it is a very fast roller coaster in the dark, he might want to pass on that opportunity. But he didn’t want to be a stick in the mud, so he insisted on standing in line for an hour for the privilege of taking a trip on Space Mountain. To put it succinctly, he did not enjoy it much. His words upon completing the ride were, “That’s nothing but a cheap drunk.” He let it be known there would not be an encore for him. Let’s suppose that after that we proposed to get on the train that goes around Disneyland. There is a station right there in Tomorrowland. We might have said, “You know, Dad, you might want to skip this one because part of this ride goes through a dark tunnel too.” Do you think that would have deterred him? After he had faced Space Mountain everything else, especially the train, was tame in comparison, so it was no problem for him.

The point here is, compared to death, everything else we face in life Is tame. Jesus has power over death, so nothing else is a threat. The key for us is to apply the truth of verse 40 to every challenge. If you believe, you will see the glory of God. That doesn’t mean that you will have it easy, will always win, but it means that God will do something in the situation that will bring honor and glory to him. When we live for his glory, that means that we will win.

I got a disease my senior year in high school, one that probably most of you went through. I went to summer school every year when I was in high school. Because of that I could have graduated a semester early if I wanted to. I had all my grad requirements met. But I wanted to play baseball that last semester, and I didn’t have some other pressing place to be. The condition really hit in that last semester. It is commonly known as senioritis. I had a serious case of it. Because I had taken extra classes I had an easy load that last semester. I didn’t have to be at school until 10 in the morning, and after 2 o’clock all I had left was baseball. I had my friends, I did the required work in my classes, but other than baseball, I was seriously over high school. It was not my future. I knew where I was going to go to college. Much more important things lay ahead. The issues were going to be much, much larger than anything in high school, and the opportunities were far more important. High school was the uninteresting and not very important past. For many teenagers what happens in high school is all consuming. But when you get serious senioritis high school loses its grip on you. What felt so terribly important for years begins to feel immature and insignificant.

Jesus’ power over death opens up the future to us. What lies ahead is much bigger, much longer, much more important than life here is. It means we kind of have a condition a bit like senioritis. We begin to live more for that life and that world than for this. Just like we saw how unimportant and immature so much of the drama of high school was, we begin to see how much of the drama of this life is trivial. People get caught up in politics, but when we see life through the lens of the resurrection, we see that all of that is mostly a sideshow. It will fade into irrelevance in eternity. The striving for position, for approval of others, for possessions, the successes of this world begin to be victims of senioritis as we focus on what really matters.

As Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-20, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” Live for the future, for the rest of your eternal life, not for high school. It is this perspective that enables us to not worry as Jesus said in verse 28. It is what helps us obey his instruction in verse 33, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

How do we store up treasures in heaven? How do we seek first his kingdom? God’s kingdom is the place where he rules, where things are done the way he wants them done, where his will is always done, where people become the way he wants them to be. What a beautiful place. Because God is love, he is the God of peace and goodness, because he is the God of joy, his kingdom is a place of love, peace, goodness and joy. It is what we all want. So how do we seek his kingdom? By allowing him to rule in our lives. By seeking his will in our lives continually. By allowing our hearts, our actions, our words, be his kingdom.

That can be hard for us, because we want our own kingdoms. Yesterday Laurie and I took Ella and Cara to a play in Balboa Park. While we were driving there we explained what Balboa Park is. We told them about the many museums. Knowing we would get there early Ella got excited about the museums and wanted to see some of them. But Cara did not want that. Laurie and I knew we wouldn’t have enough time to see a lot, but thought we could look around a little. But Cara said she didn’t want to do any of that. In her words, she wanted to go nowhere. She kept repeating that. She said it so many times I finally said, “Cara, I understand you don’t want to go to any museums. You want to go nowhere. Is the correct?” She said yes. I said, “So now you know that we are aware you want to go nowhere. We got it. So you don’t need to say it again. We are going to do the best we can to make this fun for everyone, but you’re going to have to trust us.” We went several minutes before she said it again. What was happening was she was living for her kingdom. She wanted her will to be done no matter what anyone else wanted. All that mattered was her kingdom. In that situation she needed to seek first Nana and Wapaw’s kingdom because we love her and want and know what is best for her. On the way to a restroom we came on a little art shop that offered a chance for kids to do a little art project. Suddenly she discovered that maybe what Nana and Wapaw chose wasn’t so bad. In fact, she eagerly dove into the project. I said to her, “I thought you wanted to go nowhere. Is this nowhere?”

Because Jesus demonstrated that he has power over death we know that his kingdom is real and eternal. We realize life isn’t about these few years here, but about his kingdom. The question we face every day is, will we live for our kingdom or will we live for his? Paul was given a glimpse of God’s eternal kingdom, so he looked forward to it and lived for it. I suspect Lazarus did the same. Because Jesus has power over death we can too.