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SERMON TITLE: "What is Really Real? The Reality of the Spiritual"

SCRIPTURE: John 11:1-45

DATE: June 24, 2018

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READ John 11:1-45

The story of Jesus raising Lazarus is familiar to most Christians. At the time it happened, Jesus said: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." (Jn 11:4)

Because Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead four days after he died, many people believed in him. (11:45) That gave glory to God, not to mention the joy for this family!

Later, Mary and Martha held a dinner party for Jesus and a great crowd came out—not just because of Jesus, but to see Lazarus. (Jn 12:9) Everyone wanted to see this spectacular move of power. That gave glory to Jesus.

The next day, when this crowd heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, they took palm branches and lined the road into Jerusalem and shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Jn 12:12-13)

Hosanna means, "Please save." This unexplainable miracle could be only be from a God-sent, heavenly king.

But some who were there then and some people who are here now do not believe in this reality. That begs the question, *what is the world really like?*

When you see things in your world, like Mary and Martha who saw their brother fall ill and die, what are your conclusions? For Mary and Martha, what was the world really like? Did the reality of death negate their faith?

When we see or experience things in life, do we draw the conclusion—that *is reality*. That is the hard facts, and the spiritual becomes less of a reality.

The story which you heard about Lazarus brings these two worlds together: the everyday physical real world and the just-as-real-but-harder-to-see spiritual world. There's the ordinary world and then there's the spiritual world.

Is the spiritual world powerful? Is it potent in everyday life? We really need to know that. That belief needs to blossom in us.

Jesus wanted it to blossom in his friends, Mary and Martha, so when they called for Jesus from the reality of their brother dying—it doesn't get more real than that—Jesus, even though he loved them, delayed in answering their call. (11:5-6) He ignored their call two more days.

When he finally got there, Lazarus's body was well into the process of decaying. But he said this terrible, real-life event would actually lead the disciples to see the spiritual world as very real. (11:14-15)

What is really real? In the book, *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape, the chief devil says the goal is to make humans think that the physical is 'what the world is really like' and that all religion has really been a fantasy. Their goal is to keep humans "completely fogged about the meaning of the word 'real.'"¹

So even though we have this tremendous event of the resurrection of a man, being happy about that is a subjective point of view. For example, "in birth the blood and pain are 'real,' but the rejoicing is subjective." Thus, faith is diminished to something rather powerless, to sentiment.²

You may think, if I had been there, I would have certainly believed it happened. I can't imagine how some did not believe. But, you may also believe, it won't happen today. Well, in some ways, it has happened today. Tristan, who fell out of a third story window, just sang to you.³

Lee Strobel and his wife Leslie were atheists when they married. Church and God were not part of their DNA, even after they had children.

One day their young daughter nearly choked to death in a neighborhood restaurant. A nurse was there and saved her life by doing the Heimlich movement on her. Leslie said, "Thank you for saving my daughter's life. What luck that you were here." The woman replied, "It wasn't me or luck. It was

¹ C. S. Lewis, "What the World is Really Like" from *Screwtape Letters in A Year with C. S. Lewis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 186.

² *Ibid.*, 187.

³ Seven years ago he fell from a third story window. Barely surviving surgery, it was anticipated that he would not walk, would have severe language problems, and might not be able to see. None of that happened.

Jesus. And something made me feel like I needed to eat here today. Jesus planned to save your daughter.”⁴

Lee laughed it off. But Leslie felt something. She was so overwhelmed with the possibility that her daughter could have died and she was instead saved, that she tracked down the woman to hear more about Jesus. She became a believer, got baptized, and joined a church. But when she told her husband, he was angry, even outraged and showed open hostility toward her. He hadn't married a Christian, he said, and he did not want one. He wanted a divorce because that's not the person he loved.

But the nurse who saved her daughter's life began teaching her. Leslie began praying for her atheist husband, that he would not divorce her and that he would come to know the reality of Jesus Christ.

Leslie had experienced a resurrection—not just of her daughter from potential death, but also of the reality of the spiritual in her, like Jesus wanted for Mary and Martha.

Mary and Martha's reality was that their brother had died. To them that was real. Martha expressed it this way:

She says to Jesus: *If you had been here my brother would not have died.*

He says: *Your brother will rise again.*

She says: *Yes, I'm aware he will be resurrected on the last day. What she was really saying was, but I was hoping he would live now, because you came like we asked.*

He says: *I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe will experience that very life, even though they die. She's wondering, is this really real?*

Do you ever wonder that when things go drastically wrong? Jesus then pushes Martha into the reality of the spiritual:

Do you believe this?

The tomb was real. But so was he. She says:

Yes, you are the one who saves me.

When we move into the knowledge of Jesus' resurrection power, we begin to see hope for those who we don't have much hope in or for. Jesus pushed Martha into the reality of the spiritual.

Think of the person you would most like to know Jesus, or a problem in your life you do not think can be overcome. In your own power, that is true. You have little power. No one there in the crowd understood the true reality of Jesus.

They were crying, *Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?*

There is not a soul in this room who hasn't doubted the reality of Jesus in this way. We each in our own way say, "He is not enough and He was not here." We are foggy about spiritual realities.

Jesus wept at the gravesite. Perhaps his sorrow was over the fact that it was so hard for people to realize the reality and power of the spiritual over the physical world. So to build our faith he says to us, like he said to them, "*Take away the stone!*"

Sometimes that stone is the unwillingness to see the hope in our loved ones' lives or understand that when we pray, Jesus goes to work. So we keep our loved ones pinned into the problems they have—whatever it may be that holds them down. "If they would only do this or that," we tell ourselves.

Or, we keep ourselves pinned to our problems by trying to handle them on our own. As Mary admitted, "It will stink to open it up."

Yes it will. But by opening it up, you open the spiritual reality of Jesus. You open yourself to the possibility that Jesus can do something about your loved one. Are you thinking the best of this person—even though they are far from the Lord? Are you thinking Jesus is really real?

Jesus said, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?*"

Mary decided Jesus was really real, and out Lazarus came!

Remember Leslie, who was praying for her husband to believe in Christ? It seemed hopeless. But, eventually, Jesus brought real life to Lee. He not only became a believer, as a prize-winning journalist for The Chicago Tribune he had a public forum which he has used to become an apologist for the Christian faith. He has been host of the television program *Faith Under Fire*, bestselling author of more than twenty books, and is now a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Church in Chicago. A movie has been made of his life called *A Case for Christ*.

It was a great battle between spiritual death and spiritual life but Lee said when he came out of the spiritual grave, "Everything in my life began to change for the good."

What is really real? Do you really believe the things Jesus says? Are you living there, or are you foggy? Don't give up hope, for the reality of the spiritual is powerful.

AMEN

⁴ Movie Review, "The Case for Christ," <https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/case-for-christ/>, accessed June 19, 2018.

