

Homiletics Analysis: John 11

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

John 11 records the death and resurrection of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus loved. The chapter opens with a report of Lazarus's illness sent to Jesus by his sisters (vv. 1–3). Jesus deliberately delays two days before departing for Judea (vv. 4–6), announcing to His disciples that Lazarus has died and that He is going to “awaken” him (vv. 7–16). Upon arrival, Jesus encounters Martha, who expresses both grief and qualified faith — she believes in a future resurrection but does not yet grasp who is standing before her (vv. 17–27). Jesus then encounters Mary, whose grief moves Him to deep emotional agitation and tears (vv. 28–37). At the tomb, Jesus commands the stone removed, prays publicly to the Father, and calls Lazarus out — a man dead four days, fully bound in grave clothes, who walks out alive (vv. 38–44). The chapter closes with two responses: many Jews believe (v. 45), and the Sanhedrin convenes to plot Jesus's death (vv. 46–57). Caiaphas unwittingly prophesies that one man will die for the nation (vv. 49–52), and the chapter ends with Jesus withdrawing to Ephraim while the authorities lay a trap (vv. 53–57).

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish in the reader a transfer of resurrection hope from the future to the Person of Jesus. The text's driving claim — “I am the resurrection and the life” (v. 25) — is not offered as theological information to be filed. It is the answer to Martha's grief, to the disciples' fear of death, to the crowd's confusion, and to every reader who believes in resurrection in the abstract but has not yet anchored that belief to Jesus Himself. The intent is that the reader move from Martha's position in verse 24 — sound doctrine, future orientation, present desolation — to the position Jesus is calling her to in verse 26: a living, present trust in the One who holds resurrection in His own person. The miracle is designed to substantiate the claim, not merely to demonstrate power. God is also using this chapter to press the reader toward a confession like Martha's in verse 27 — not just belief about resurrection but direct personal confession of who Jesus is. The closing Sanhedrin scene is not an afterthought; it frames the miracle within the larger movement of John's Gospel, showing that the very act of life-giving provokes the powers of death to mobilize against Jesus — and that He walks into that mobilization deliberately, as Lord over it all.

Subject Sentence: Jesus is Himself the resurrection and the life — death has no final authority over those who believe in Him.

Primary Claim: Jesus confronts every believer's grief, delay, and death-fear with a claim that is not merely a promise but a Person — He does not give resurrection life, *He is it* — and He calls the reader to anchor hope not in a future event but in present trust in Him.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “I Am the Resurrection” Claim (v. 25)

The central interpretive question is whether verse 25's “I am the resurrection and the life” is primarily a christological identity statement or primarily a promise about the believer's future. Evangelical traditions broadly affirm both dimensions, but they are not equally primary. The Wesleyan and Baptist traditions rightly emphasize the comfort and assurance dimension — Jesus is promising resurrection to those who die believing in Him — and this is textually warranted. But the force of the “I AM” construction in John (cf. 6:35; 8:12; 10:11; 14:6) is consistently a claim about Jesus's identity, not merely His beneficence. He does not say “I will raise you.” He says “I am the resurrection.” The primary claim is ontological before it is promissory. The promise flows from the identity, not the other way around. Reformed exposition must hold both — the identity as the grounding and the promise as the consequence — without flattening the statement into mere reassurance.

The Delay (vv. 4–6)

A recurring interpretive mistake is reading Jesus's delay as puzzling, even callous — a problem to be explained away. Some traditions that emphasize divine impassibility struggle here, and some pastoral treatments are so eager to resolve the delay apologetically that they lose its theological payload. The delay is not a problem to solve; it is the text's first theological statement. Jesus explicitly states His purpose: “this illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (v. 4). The delay is intentional, purposeful, and loving. John tells us explicitly that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus — and *therefore* stayed two days longer (v. 5–6). Reformed exposition must hold this without softening it: the loving thing, from Jesus's vantage point, is to allow the full weight of death to settle so that the glory of the resurrection will be unmistakable. This is not cruelty; it is a higher love operating at a higher level than the sisters can see. The preacher who skips over this or smooths it too quickly robs the congregation of its greatest comfort — that God's delays are not absences.

“This Sickness Is Not unto Death” and Lazarus's Death

A common surface-level difficulty: Jesus says the sickness “does not lead to death” (v. 4), and then Lazarus dies. This is not a contradiction that requires harmonization so much as a precision that requires definition. Jesus means that death is not the *final* outcome — not that death will not occur. The statement is eschatological in register, not predictive in the narrow sense. The Dispensational tradition sometimes makes this overly complicated by asking whether Lazarus had a glorified body upon resuscitation — a question the text does

not raise or answer and that distracts from John's focus. Lazarus's resuscitation is distinguished from resurrection elsewhere in the New Testament (he will die again), but John is using it typologically and christologically, not technically. The point is not Lazarus's ontological state after walking out of the tomb; the point is what the act reveals about Jesus.

Martha's Confession (v. 27) and Comparison with Peter

Martha's confession — "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world" — is sometimes read as inadequate or incomplete because she continues to grieve and expresses doubt at the tomb (v. 39). The Wesleyan tradition sometimes uses this to argue for a post-conversion deepening of faith. The Reformed reading is more careful: Martha's confession is fully orthodox and is treated by the text as genuine. Her continued grief is not a failure of faith but a mark of humanity — even Jesus weeps. Her hesitation at the tomb ("Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days") is an expression of how slow we are to let our doctrinal confession govern our actual expectations. This is not unbelief; it is the universal gap between what we know to be true and what our instincts reach for in the moment of crisis. The preacher who dismisses Martha as "weak in faith" has failed to notice that she is the one who walked out to meet Jesus while Mary stayed in the house — and she is the one who receives the great "I AM" declaration directly.

Caiaphas's Prophecy (vv. 49–52)

The Reformed and Lutheran traditions align here in reading Caiaphas's statement as genuine, involuntary prophecy — the high priest speaking better than he knew, fulfilling his office despite his murderous intentions. The text explicitly states that he "prophesied" (v. 51) and that John understands this as a divine utterance about the atonement. Some traditions read this as merely ironic or as John's editorial comment imposed on a political calculation. But John's "he did not say this of his own accord" (v. 51) is too explicit to be explained away. The Reformed doctrine of providence is directly on display here: God accomplishing His purposes through — not around — the murderous plotting of wicked men. This should be stated directly in exposition.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 2:17; 3:19** — Death as the consequence of sin establishes the problem that John 11 addresses; Jesus's dominion over death must be understood against the backdrop of what sin did to creation. The one who has authority over death is the one who can undo what sin introduced.
- **Ezekiel 37:1–14** — The valley of dry bones: God's sovereign power to restore life to the utterly dead is the Old Testament precedent for what Jesus does at Lazarus's tomb. "I will open your graves and raise you from your graves" (Ezek. 37:12) is fulfilled typologically in John 11 and eschatologically in the believer's resurrection.

- **John 5:24–29** — Jesus’s earlier teaching that the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and live (v. 25) is enacted literally in John 11:43. “Lazarus, come out” is John 5:28 happening in real time — the hour that is “coming” is arriving.
- **Romans 8:11** — “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” The same resurrection power that calls Lazarus out of the tomb is the indwelling power available to every believer — Paul grounds present Christian life in the same reality John 11 narrates.
- **1 Corinthians 15:20–26, 54–57** — Paul’s resurrection chapter grounds the believer’s hope in the same claim Jesus makes in John 11: death is the last enemy, and it has been conquered. “Death is swallowed up in victory” (v. 54) is the doctrinal statement; John 11 is its enacted demonstration.

Aim: To confront the reader’s abstract, future-oriented resurrection belief with the present, personal, incarnate reality of Jesus — calling them from doctrinal orthodoxy about resurrection to living trust in the Resurrection Himself.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Lazarus is ill; sisters send word to Jesus: “he whom you love is ill”	Jesus is identified by relationship, not title; the sisters assume the report is sufficient
4	Jesus declares the illness is for the glory of God and the Son of God	First theological frame: purpose stated before outcome; this governs the whole chapter
5–6	John states Jesus loved the family — <i>therefore</i> He stayed two days	The delay is explicitly an act of love; a structural shock to natural expectations
7–10	Jesus announces return to Judea; disciples warn of the danger	Disciples think in terms of physical danger; Jesus speaks in terms of light and darkness
11–16	Jesus tells the disciples Lazarus has died; He is going to “awaken” him	Thomas’s “let us also go, that we may die with him” — courage and misunderstanding

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		combined
17–19	Jesus arrives; Lazarus has been in the tomb four days; many Jews present	Four days is significant — removes any question of apparent death; the crowd is a witness
20–22	Martha meets Jesus; “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”	She believes in His power over illness; she has not yet grasped His authority over death
23–24	Jesus: “Your brother will rise again.” Martha: “I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”	Sound doctrine, future orientation, present desolation — the position Jesus is about to move her from
25–26	“I am the resurrection and the life” — the central claim of the chapter	The “I AM” shifts from future event to present Person; two questions follow, demanding personal response
27	Martha’s confession: “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God”	Full orthodox confession — she receives the declaration and responds in faith
28–32	Martha calls Mary; Mary falls at Jesus’s feet with the same words as Martha	Same words, different posture — Mary’s grief is more immediate; she weeps; others weep
33–35	Jesus is “deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled”; He weeps	Greek: <i>embrimaomai</i> — not mere sadness but profound agitation, indignation against death; “Jesus wept”
36–37	Crowd divided: “See how he loved him” / “Could he not have kept this man from dying?”	The question of the crowd is the question of every sufferer: where was He?
38–39	Jesus comes to the tomb; orders the stone removed; Martha objects	The gap between confession (v. 27) and trust in action (v. 39) — “Lord, by this time there will be an odor”
40	Jesus: “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would	Not rebuke but re-anchoring — the call back to the frame

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	see the glory of God?"	established in v. 4
41–42	Jesus prays publicly — not for His own need but for the crowd's faith	The prayer is for witnesses: "I said this on account of the people standing around"
43–44	"Lazarus, come out." — Lazarus emerges, still bound; Jesus: "Unbind him"	The voice of the Son of God does what John 5:28 predicted; the grave clothes remain — life precedes full freedom
45–46	Many believe; some report to the Pharisees	The miracle produces the same divided response as Jesus's words throughout John
47–48	Sanhedrin convenes; fear of Roman intervention if Jesus continues	Their stated concern is political; their actual concern is loss of power
49–52	Caiaphas prophesies: "It is better for one man to die for the people"	John explicitly names this as prophecy; God speaks through the murderous high priest — providence on display
53–57	The council plots to kill Jesus; Jesus withdraws to Ephraim; Passover approaches	The life-giving act seals the death sentence; Jesus moves toward Jerusalem deliberately

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–16	The Deliberate Delay: Jesus receives the news, frames the purpose, and moves toward death — His own and Lazarus's
2	17–27	The Encounter with Martha: Sound doctrine meets the living Person — "I am the resurrection and the life"
3	28–37	The Encounter with Mary: Jesus meets grief with grief

Division	Verses	Label
		— agitation, compassion, and tears
4	38–44	The Sign: Jesus commands life from death — Lazarus called out of the tomb
5	45–57	The Consequence: Belief and murderous opposition — the life-giving act that triggers the death plot

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Jesus is Himself the resurrection and the life — death has no final authority over those who believe in Him.

Primary Claim: Jesus confronts every believer’s grief, delay, and death-fear with a claim that is not merely a promise but a Person — He does not give resurrection life, He *is* it — and He calls the reader to anchor hope not in a future event but in present trust in Him.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe every unexplained delay as purposeful love operating at a level you cannot yet see. (*Mind/belief*)

The text is explicit that Jesus loved this family — and *therefore* stayed two days longer. The natural instinct is to read delay as absence or indifference. John 11 will not allow this. If you are in a season where you have sent your report to Jesus — you have prayed, you have told Him the need — and He has not moved, the chapter’s frame is not “He does not care.” It is “the glory of God is in view, and the full weight of the situation must settle before the full weight of the answer can be seen.” The application is a cognitive reframe: God’s delays are not absences, and His timing is not indifference dressed in sovereignty. He knows the situation more completely than the sisters did, and He loves you more than they supposed He loved Lazarus.

2. Move your resurrection hope from the last day to the living Person standing before you now. (*Mind/belief*)

Martha is not wrong in verse 24 — she is incomplete. A future-only resurrection hope is true doctrine held at an insufficient depth. The “I AM” claim of verse 25 is designed to relocate hope from the calendar to the Person: not “there will be a resurrection on the last day” but “the One who holds resurrection in Himself is present with you today.” Examine where your faith is actually anchored. Is it anchored in the event — the future day when all things

will be made right — or in the Person who is already “the life,” already present, already the ground on which you stand? The chapter is calling you to the second, not as a replacement for the first, but as its living ground.

3. Bring your actual grief to Jesus — not your managed, theologically-composed grief, but the real thing. (*Affections/worship*)

Mary falls at Jesus’s feet and weeps. She says exactly what Martha said, but she says it differently. Jesus does not correct her grief; He is moved by it — troubled, agitated, weeping Himself. The application is not that Christians should not grieve, or that grief signals weak faith. The application is that grief belongs at Jesus’s feet, not suppressed behind doctrine or managed into composure for the sake of public witness. The shortest verse in Scripture — “Jesus wept” — is not there to tell us Jesus was human. It is there to tell us that our grief moves Him. Bring the real grief: the four-day grief, the grief that has started to smell, the grief you have been holding together in front of the crowd. He is not asking you to resolve it before you approach.

4. Let your orthodox confession about Jesus govern your actual expectations, not just your stated beliefs. (*Will/behavior*)

Martha confesses in verse 27 that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Then in verse 39 she objects to the stone being removed: “Lord, by this time there will be an odor.” This is not hypocrisy — it is the universal human gap between doctrinal confession and lived expectation. The application is concrete and searching: identify one area of your life where what you confess about Jesus (“He is Lord,” “He is able,” “He holds my future”) does not yet govern what you actually expect, plan, or fear. The command Jesus gives Martha — “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” — is a call to let the confession do its work all the way down into expectation and action, not just into the creed you recite.

5. Recognize that the powers of death are not neutral about the life that Jesus gives — and that He walked into their opposition as Lord, not as victim. (*Affections/worship*)

The closing movement of the chapter is sobering: the greatest miracle in Jesus’s public ministry is the direct cause of the Sanhedrin’s death plot. Life-giving provokes death-plotting. The chapter does not end in triumph but in tension — Jesus withdraws, the trap is being set, Passover approaches. The application is that those who follow the Resurrection and the Life should not be surprised when their testimony to new life in Christ provokes resistance, hostility, or institutional opposition. But more than that: notice that Jesus does not withdraw permanently. He withdraws to return. He is not outmaneuvered by Caiaphas. He walks toward Jerusalem deliberately, as the One who commands the dead to come out of tombs — not as a man cornered by events He cannot control. The Life is going to lay Himself down, and no council is determining that; He is.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: John 11 is the climactic sign in John's Gospel, and its theological center is the ontological claim of verse 25: Jesus does not mediate resurrection — He *is* resurrection. This moves the chapter beyond miracle narrative into a statement about the nature of the Son of God. Where the Old Testament presents God as the author of life and death (Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:6), Jesus claims that authority as His own possession. The chapter also establishes that death is not merely a medical or biological event — it is an enemy (the language of 1 Corinthians 15 is anticipated here), and Jesus's agitation at the tomb is not grief alone but what many commentators identify as righteous indignation against death as the final insult of sin against creation. The chapter further demonstrates the unity of Father and Son in the public prayer of verses 41–42 — Jesus prays not for power He needs but for the crowd's benefit, confirming that the Father always hears Him. And in Caiaphas's unwitting prophecy, the chapter establishes that the atonement is not a contingency plan but the eternal purpose of God, unfolding through even the murderous designs of wicked men.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: John 11 is a concentrated display of Reformed theology's twin emphases on the sovereignty of God and the particularity of grace. The delay is not a puzzle — it is sovereignty operating at a higher register than the sisters' request, governing the timing and purpose of the miracle entirely from God's initiative, not human pressure. Jesus does not come when called; He comes when the Father's purpose is served. The miracle itself is entirely monergistic: Lazarus contributes nothing. He does not cooperate with his own resurrection, does not exercise faith from the tomb, does not respond to a general offer. He hears a specific, sovereign, effectual call — "Lazarus, come out" — and he comes. Reformed theology's understanding of regeneration as sovereign, specific, and irresistible finds its enacted parable here. Furthermore, Caiaphas's prophecy is a direct demonstration of double-agency providence: God accomplishing His redemptive purpose through the sinful intentions of men who mean it for murder (cf. Genesis 50:20; Acts 2:23). The cross is not the defeat of Jesus's program by His enemies; it is the execution of God's program through His enemies. John 11 plants that flag before the Passion narrative begins.

Main Takeaway

Jesus is not merely promising you a resurrection on the last day — He is the resurrection, standing before you now. Martha had the doctrine right and the desolation wrong, because she had not yet grasped that the One she was talking to was not an agent of future hope but its living source. Stop treating your resurrection hope as a comfort for the distant future

and start treating it as a present reality grounded in a living Person. The grave could not hold Lazarus when Jesus spoke — and it has no ultimate hold on you.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the delay as a problem rather than the first theological statement.** The most common homiletical failure in John 11 is spending significant time apologetically explaining why Jesus waited — as if the delay is embarrassing and must be excused. The text does not apologize for the delay. It frames it explicitly as love (“he loved them, *therefore* he stayed”). The preacher who rushes past verses 5–6 or softens them has lost the chapter’s most pastorally powerful insight: that God’s delays in answering prayer are not failures of love but expressions of a love operating at a higher register than our requests. Preach the delay, don’t explain it away.
- **Making “Jesus wept” primarily about the humanity of Christ rather than His response to death.** The tears of Jesus are real and important, but the Greek of verse 33 (*embrimaomai*) indicates more than sadness — it is a word of agitation, even indignation. Many commentators note that Jesus is not simply moved by grief here; He is troubled by death itself — the intrusion of the enemy into creation. Reducing this to “Jesus was human and felt sad” misses the chapter’s presentation of Jesus as the one who is about to go to war with the last enemy. His tears are not weakness; they are the anger of the Resurrection encountering what resurrection will destroy.
- **Preaching Martha as a model of weak faith compared to Mary.** This misreads the text. Martha walks out to meet Jesus; Mary stays in the house. Martha receives the “I AM” declaration directly and makes the chapter’s central confession. Her hesitation at the tomb (v. 39) is not evidence of inferior faith — it is evidence of how slowly even genuine faith translates into moment-by-moment expectation. She is the relatable everyman of the chapter, not its negative example. The preacher who positions Mary as the spiritually superior sister has imported assumptions the text does not support.
- **Extracting “I am the resurrection and the life” as a proof-text for general immortality or resurrection hope, divorced from its immediate dialogical context.** The statement is made to a grieving woman who has just displayed exactly the theological position Jesus is about to correct — sound future doctrine without present personal trust. The “I AM” statement only lands with its full force when the listener understands what Martha has just said in verse 24 and why it is insufficient. Preach the dialogue, not the quote in isolation.
- **Treating Lazarus’s resuscitation as equivalent to or illustrative of Christian resurrection.** Lazarus walks out of the tomb still mortal — he will die again. His

resuscitation is a sign pointing beyond itself; it is not a model of what Christian resurrection will be. The distinction matters pastorally: Christian resurrection is transformation into an imperishable body (1 Corinthians 15:42–44), not a restoration to mortal life. The miracle is a christological sign, not a biographical preview of every believer's future experience.

- **Missing the chapter's bookend structure and ending the sermon at verse 44.**

The chapter does not end with the miracle. It ends with a death plot and a trap being set. The preacher who ends at Lazarus walking out has cut the chapter in half. The closing movement (vv. 45–57) is theologically essential: it shows that life-giving provokes death-plotting, that Caiaphas's murderous plan is simultaneously God's atoning purpose, and that Jesus moves toward Jerusalem knowing exactly what awaits Him. The resurrection of Lazarus and the death of Jesus are not in tension — they are cause and consequence, and John has written the chapter to make that connection unmistakable.