

## **Good news in the face of climate crisis: John 11**

Sermon by Silvia Purdie

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It is hard, but the starting point is that climate change is not good news. In fact, it is really very bad news. Such bad news that our minds struggle with grasp it. When we read something like the prediction of over a metre of sea level over the coming decades, what happens in your head?

First you might think, surely not! That must be an exaggeration. That can't be possible. I mean, all of the Wellington inner city would be under water at high tide, that's just ridiculous.

Second, you might think, well, a good thing we are living in Karori! I don't know about you but my mind wants to grab hold of any positives. And, to be honest, I did choose to buy a house in Upper Hutt partly because I wanted to be safe from sea level rise. I feel rather smug about it, as you can up here on the hill.

Third, well, it's all very well being safe on the hill but you probably would like to be able to go somewhere other than Karori, at least sometimes. And you probably quite like walking on a sandy beach. What if sea level rise strips away the sand from Kapiti, and Petone, leaving only rocks and sea walls? Well, that would be sad.

Are you willing to let yourself feel sad about our changing climate? Can the reality of global warming affect you?

At the moment it still seems far off. Certainly, Cyclone Gabrielle brought climate change closer to home, but still the weather has been pretty settled here in Wellington. Nothing much is changing yet. We hear reports of massive fires, terrible floods, and species threatened with extinction, but it is not happening to us.

Perhaps a bit like Jesus and his disciples receiving word that their friend Lazarus was sick.

Presumably it wasn't that bad. Jesus didn't seem too worried about it.

How worried should we be about the sickness of our world?

My husband Chris has spent much of this month with the army unit sent to the Hawkes Bay to offer disaster relief to farming communities cut off and smashed over by Cyclone Gabrielle. As the army trucks made their way slowly up the valley, carefully across fords where bridges were washed out, past massive banks of silt, they reached people who were pleased to see them, pleased to have genuine help. He talked with farmers who had lost hectares and hectares of land, just washed away, hillsides reduced to bare limestone. These farmers did not even know how many animals they had lost, as they have no fences to contain the animals they had left. Vineyards and orchards are ripped out or buried deep. Chris met amazing resilient people, so immersed in coping and helping others they had not had time yet to begin to grieve for what they have lost.

All those affected by Cyclone Gabrielle face a double grief: for the homes and farms they used to have, but also the fear of future grief. If they rebuild, will this just happen again? Climate change undermines our sense of normal. The weather gets weirder, the future is uncertain.

Psychologists are describing this as ecological grief. Sadness for what is lost, and anxiety for what losses may come. It is the attack of climate crisis on hearts and minds.

So much for the bad news. Where, then, is the good news?

From a Christian perspective, the answer to every question is, of course – Jesus! Jesus is the good news. And the stories of the gospels provide us with tracks in to Jesus. I am here today to talk about eco church and bring an ‘enviro’ message, and I am genuinely passionate about eco theology. I see it as our best hope, the most useful approach to climate change. How, then, is Jesus the answer to climate crisis? and how do we see this through the lens of John 11, the story of the raising of Lazarus? I would like to pick out 4 small bits of John 11, that enable us to walk with Jesus through this.

1. First, **“Let us go to him.”** When Jesus decided the time was right, he said, “Come on, let’s go.” He went to his friends who were grieving. The army did, on your behalf, they went to those in crisis. And this is the first invitation of eco theology, to face toward the crisis, to step into the crisis. Yes, it’s easier to avoid it, but I call on you to look climate change in the eye, to go there, in your head, to learn more about what is happening to our world. Jesus is the good news of courage. We can do it. Nothing is too hard, when you walk with Jesus. Let us go.

2. When he gets there Jesus takes the time to talk with his special friends Martha and Mary. In this conversation comes one of the most important verses in the Bible. One of John’s great “I am” statements about Jesus. This is Jesus teaching them and revealing himself to them, even in the midst of their strife. **“I am the resurrection and the life.”**

People often ask me where I see hope. Some people don’t think we should talk about hope because we have to confront the realities ahead of us without telling ourselves that it will all be alright. But I am a Christian, I believe in Jesus, I am a minister of the Gospel. And I stand with Martha as Jesus tells me, **“I am the resurrection and the life.”** This is my hope. This is my vision, it’s right here, in Jesus. My future is claimed by Jesus. Your future is claimed by Jesus. He has got this. He is the resurrection. He is all the life we will know in the end. He promises us that those who believe in him will not die but will know, ultimately, resurrection.

It’s a great thing to ask yourself what resurrection will be like. I doubt it has much to do with clouds and harps. It is not insubstantial. The resurrection is the new heaven and the new earth, when all will be made new. Eco theology would claim that earth and heaven come together will include the animals, the birds, the astonishing diversity of creation. Eco theology rejects a human-only vision of resurrection. How that might work out in practice stretches my brain beyond what I can grasp, but I believe it. Why? Because I believe in Jesus, who loved the sheep and the lilies and the sparrows. How ridiculous to envisage a future restoration exclusively populated by humans! My God is bigger than that.

How is this good news in the face of climate change? For me, I have to know that God offers a resurrection and a life that will ultimately put the suffering, the extinctions and the losses of climate crisis into a long long story of glory and redemption. Some of my friends think I am deluding myself, but I honestly could not work in this space if I did not believe that. I cling to the good news that this is ultimately not all up to us, that God is working his purpose out.

3. Jesus continues on, walking slowly toward the tomb. And then comes the shortest verse in the Bible, and possibly the most moving. John 11 verse 35. **“Jesus wept.”** There is good news coming but for now there is emotional work to do. Jesus wept, beside the tomb. He knew

that Lazarus would walk again, and yet tears flowed down his face. Jesus wept quietly, alone among the crowd, overflowing in his own heart the suffering of those around him, the agony of the world, his own coming death, the reality of pain and loss ... bible scholars argue about this stuff.

Why do you think Jesus wept?

Knowing that it would all work out in the end did not make Jesus immune from pain.

In order for us as people of faith and courage to engage in a world in climate crisis we must do the emotional labour, together with Jesus. To feel what is there to feel. Emotional honesty is my second point about eco theology. It is not just an analytical process. It requires of us to feel whatever it is that we feel.

And you may not be feeling grief for the world you used to know but I can tell you for a fact that many young people are. Scientists are. Ecologists are. Your grandchildren probably are. They need you to help them name how they are feeling about the world, about the future, about the whales and the plastic and the ocean. You can only listen well when you have faced your own emotions. Then you can honour the tears of others. Jesus wept.

4. Lastly, my fourth verse this morning. verse 43: **Jesus said, "Lazarus, come out."** Actually, that's not right – Jesus didn't say it, he yelled it, loudly. "Lazarus, come out!!" I don't suppose Jesus raised his voice very often. I always imagine Jesus' voice cutting through the chatter with a quiet intensity, a calm but unmissable authority. But here he cries out loudly, shocking the crowd into silence, shaking the very stones, calling up the dead. Come out! Jesus could have stooped down, gone in, lifted up Lazarus or breathed on him as he did with others. But here he just calls. His voice resonates with the act of creation at the beginning of time. Light, come out! Sun and stars, come out! Fish, come out!

Lazarus had to pick himself up, bust through the stifling grave clothes wrapping him around, stand and walk and emerge into the light. Action was required of Lazarus. He had to choose to step from Te Pō back into Te Ao Marama, the dark of death into the land of the living.

What if Jesus was also calling us, even yelling at us – Come out! What if action was required of us also, to choose the light over the comfortable dark?

What cloths bind us round? How do we need to stumble and shuffle and stoop and so emerge into a new way of living?

This is my final point: eco theology leads to action. It can never be of intellectual interest only, never be a comfortable conversation because it propels us to take action. Come out!

Eco church does not tell you what actions you have to take. There are plenty of suggestions for how to live more sustainable, and how to make a significant contribution to reducing our carbon emissions and how to be more resilient in the face of climate change. Ecological action is not about ticking boxes or being 'PC', it is about positive solutions, real-world benefits for mental health, making a difference here in Karori. But the actions you choose will emerge from what you know of Jesus, where you see his Spirit alive in your local community, what stirs in your hearts in response to his call.

I have summarised John 11 with four short verses, four words – and tears- of Jesus.

**"Let us go to him."**

**"I am the resurrection and the life."**

**"Jesus wept."**

**“Lazarus, come out.”**

I have used these as stepping stones to summarise Eco theology in response to the climate crisis: 4 invitations:

- the invitation to face the reality of climate change with courage
- the ultimate vision of resurrection and the hope that sustains us
- the encouragement to feel the emotions of climate crisis, and to enable others to share their feelings with you
- and finally the loud call to take action

I hope this enriches your thinking about what mission looks like in 2023. These are challenging ideas in challenging times. I would like to end as Jesus began the story, by affirming that this will, in its own way, reveal God’s glory. I pray that you, here in Karori, will reveal God’s glory, in the simple things, in the care you show for each other, your neighbours, and for God’s creation. Amen.