

+ John 11:17-27, 38-45 + Fix Your Eyes on Jesus—The Author of Life! +
+ 5th Sunday in Lent + Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 2 April 2017 +

“Your brother was a great guy. He was a worker and a friend. He went to synagogue Sabbath after Sabbath. He will be missed.” “Do you remember that time when he/we...?” “I’m so sorry for your loss. This was totally unexpected. If only Jesus could’ve come through for you...” “Lazarus is looking down on you and watching over you.” “I will say a prayer for you and your family next time I’m at the temple.” “My condolences.” Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, had recently died after a prolonged illness. So what do you think people said at his funeral? How did they try to console the two sisters? Apart from the communal wailing and weeping that was common in the culture, you wonder if it sounded a lot like what you often hear at calling hours and funerals today. They were all trying to be sympathetic, but few, if any, actually comforted Martha and Mary.

Yet what probably left the sisters feeling emptiest wasn’t the shallow sympathies, but the fact that Jesus never showed up. Mary and Martha knew how sick their brother was, but they also knew the Lord could do something about it. They sent messages pleading for Jesus to help their brother, but days passed and no Jesus even as Lazarus breathed his last. With grief overflowing, the two sisters prepared their brother for burial lovingly wrapping his body in strips of cloth packed with fragrant spices. Tears rolled down their cheeks as they placed a cloth over his face. Others placed his body in a tomb cut out of rock. A large, heavy stone was rolled in front of the opening, and all the sisters had left was grief and a big, empty lack of comfort.

Four days passed, and Lazarus still wasn’t coming out of that tomb. Finally Jesus arrived and when he did, Martha ran out to meet him. She hugged her Savior and buried her face in his chest as tears rolled down her cheeks. **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. Yet even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”** She really wasn’t angry with Jesus for delaying, but she couldn’t hold back her grief. Her faith felt wobbly, but her hope in Jesus was still there.

How did Jesus answer Martha? Did he offer some shallow condolence? Did he tell her that her brother was a good man or that he had fond memories of Lazarus or that Lazarus was looking down on her? No. Jesus brought real comfort to Martha in her grief. He pointed her to the resurrection. **“Your brother will rise again.”** Now this was a powerful promise of what Jesus was about to do, but Martha understandably wasn’t thinking of that. **“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”** Martha spoke confidently that on the Last Day God would raise her brother to life, but Jesus had more than hope in the coming resurrection for her.

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Jesus brought a comfort that no sinful person could give—the comfort of the Author of Life himself. Jesus wanted Martha to realize that in him, there is life. In him, there is resurrection. In fact, he is life itself. He has the power to restore life. Jesus wanted Martha to realize that her brother would have life again that very day.

Has death touched your life? Have you had to endure the heartache and grief that come with death, leaving an empty spot in your heart? Most of us have, but even if you haven’t, a time will come when death will touch every one of our lives in some way. It’s a fact of life. Everything and everyone eventually dies. Death is a terrible, ugly, unnatural thing.

Like so many before us, we try to cover it up when it happens. We try to mask death to make the experience more bearable. Yet no amount of make-up, flowers, or pleasant cemetery locations can possibly mask the reality of death. No pouring out of condolences, well-wishes, or sympathies can fully remove the pain of grief. When the funeral ends and the mourners leave and the extended family returns home, the pain is still there. That loved one is gone and won’t be coming back. Yet even then, you’re not alone.

Even when all is said and done, Jesus is still there. Through his Word, Jesus comes to you. He puts his everlasting arms around you and dries your tears. He knows your pain. He knows your grief. He himself wept at Lazarus’ tomb. He knows your loss, yet Jesus also brings you comfort that can only come from God himself. He comforts you not with condolences, but with life. **“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”** With that promise, with that comforting reality, Jesus wipes away your tears.

With that promise, Jesus guarantees life. He guarantees that your loved one who died in the Lord will still live. With that promise, Jesus offers life that will never end. With that promise, Jesus fills your emptiness with his fullness and heals your grief. When he says, **“The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live,”** he gets personal. He tells you that in him, you have life. You no longer need to go through this life resigned to the fact

that you'll die, but you can go through this life with eternal hope. Even though you will face death, eternal life awaits on the other side. When he says, **"Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die,"** Jesus speaks to all believers. That promise of eternal life is for every person who believes in him, even for your loved ones who die in the Lord. That's true comfort we all need to hear!

...But the comfort of the Author of Life isn't just words. It isn't just promises of resurrection or eternal life. It isn't just a glimpse of heaven portrayed by a mortal preacher. In fact, if you page through the Gospels, you won't find a single funeral sermon preached by Jesus anywhere. A young daughter of a synagogue leader dies and Jesus gives her back to her parents at the funeral. A coffin containing the body of a young man is carried out to the cemetery and Jesus gives the young man back to his widowed mother at the funeral. Jesus missed the funeral for Lazarus. In fact, four days passed before Jesus arrived. Jesus gave words of comfort to Martha, but then he did even more.

Jesus was sick and tired of what death had been doing to his world and to his people, so he humiliated death. When Jesus went to the tomb, he asked them to roll the stone away. Martha rightly objected since a bad smell would've set in after four days, but Jesus insisted, **"Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"**

Without hesitation, they removed the stone. After offering a prayer to his Father, Jesus called out in a loud voice, **"Lazarus, come out!"** You could've heard a pin drop as the crowd breathlessly waited for something to happen. Would something happen? Could Jesus possibly come through? After all, Jesus had healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised people from the dead. Jesus had also said, **"My sheep hear my voice..."** (John 10:27)

Suddenly there stood Lazarus at the entrance to the tomb wrapped up in burial cloths. There he was...alive! Not a zombie or a mummy or some horrible figure from a scary movie, but fully, truly alive and well. All Jesus had to do was call him out. Everyone stood in awe of Christ's amazing, comforting power. In the shadow of death, Jesus clearly demonstrated that he is the Author of Life.

You know, someday it'll be us. One day your body or mine will be lying in a casket. No matter how hard you try to extend your life through exercise, eating right, and the efforts of medicine, your life will still end. The worst part of it is that every one of us has earned that death. The Apostle Paul explains, **"The wages of sin is death."** (Romans 6:23) Every time you disobey God, you earn death.

Have you ever thought about that? Every time you snap at your spouse, every time you fight with your siblings, every time you get lazy at work, every time you disobey your parents or teachers, every time you selfishly look at someone or something that doesn't belong to you, you earn death. From a passing lustful thought to the grossest act of violence, we all earn death. There is no way that you and I can possibly cheat death or avoid it. Like some frightening creature from an old horror movie, it stalks and hunts us so it can drag us down to the fires of hell, except you can't turn off the TV to make it go away, because death is horribly real.

If left to this terrifying reality, we'd have no hope, but Jesus is the Author of Life even when faced with his own death! You see, when Jesus raised Lazarus he was mere days away from entering Jerusalem for the final battle with death. On Palm Sunday, Jesus would leave Bethany, cross over the Mount of Olives, and enter Jerusalem as the humble, conquering king. That battle for our souls took him through betrayal and blasphemy, beatings and humiliation.

That battle took him to a final showdown on a cross outside Jerusalem. Yet on that cross, Jesus took on himself all the wages our sins earned. On that cross, Jesus let death take his life so you can have life and then he took your place in the tomb. Yet like Lazarus, Jesus didn't stay there. With the first glimmers of Easter morning, Jesus rose from the dead taking the fear out of death. He humiliated death and left behind a harmless shadow.

All of that was on Jesus' mind as he stood there comforting Martha, as he stood at the foul-smelling entrance of Lazarus' tomb, as he called back his dear follower from death to life. It was a glimpse of the resurrection victory that Christ would win on Easter morning. It was a glimpse of what Jesus is going to do on the Last Day when he calls all the dead from their graves, even you and me if death takes our lives before then. On that Last Day, Jesus will defeat the final enemy once and for all, and bring us body and soul to be with him in the glories of heaven for all eternity.

...But what do we do in the meantime? Why does it matter for us who are living right now that Jesus has overcome the power of death? Well, Jesus has already called you from death to life. You were headed for hell, but at your Baptism, Jesus called you from spiritual death to spiritual life. In the waters of Baptism, Jesus drowned your sinful nature and gave you new life through faith in him. Now by faith, you can confess with Martha, **"Yes,**

Lord...I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who comes into the world.” You can be certain that because Jesus has given you spiritual life, he will also restore you to life at the resurrection on the Last Day.

You and I will see the horrible shadow of death someday, but even there Jesus is by your side. When faced with the loss of a loved one, Jesus is your comfort in grief. When faced with the reality of your own death, Jesus is your power over death. When faced with the uncertainty of the future, Jesus is your hope of eternal life. You can be confident about all that because Jesus is and always will be the Author of Life. Fix your eyes on him...always! Amen.