

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

MARCH 29, 2020

Sermon Text: John 11:1-45

“Jesus on the Road to the Resurrection”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The Death of Lazarus

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴But when Jesus heard it he said, “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.”

⁵Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶So, when he heard that Lazarus^[a] was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world.¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.”¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” ¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” ¹³Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died,¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶So Thomas, called the Twin,^[b] said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

I Am the Resurrection and the Life

¹⁷Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles^[c] off, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.^[d] Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you

believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

Jesus Weeps

²⁸ When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹ And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved^[e] in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴ And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus Raises Lazarus

³⁸ Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” ⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Dear Friends in Christ

This morning I want to make use of a sermon that was provide by Lutheran Church Canada. It is a comforting message, reminding us that our Lord Jesus has power over death – power to save.

Our text tells us that *Jesus wept*. He wept because He loved Lazarus and because He hates death. Jesus is the Life of the world. He loves the world, and each person in it,

perfectly. He loved Lazarus; that was clear to see. Those grieving friends of Mary and Martha who saw Him weep said, *'See how He loved him!'*

Jesus wept over the grief that you know right now. He is the Man of Sorrows. Not only at the moment of His death at the cross, but even here in the midst of His life, Jesus knew the anguishes that all would ever feel, even you, right now, anxious in so many ways in the uncertainties of these days.

But weeping doesn't look to be enough. Some of them wondered: *Could not He Who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?* Maybe you are asking that kind of question too. Could this pandemic not have been prevented? Not just scientifically, not just by political readiness, but by the providence of our God Who made this world? The world around you may be asking that question of you.

When Jesus shows up in Bethany, four days after Lazarus died, it's not just the world asking that question, it's not just the Jews who had come to grieve with Martha and Mary. The sisters whom Jesus loved were asking it too: *when Martha heard that Jesus was coming... Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died... When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."*

When we run out of hopes and cures, and the shadow of death looms large, the word goes out to family and friends. "Your friend, your father, mother, sister, brother, beloved is dying. It's time to come." Then, with nothing more to be done, we wait as the passing procession of the loving and the helpless pass by to say their goodbyes. Perhaps it was that way for Mary and Martha. They sent for Jesus. Their message was simple: "Lord, the one You love is sick." Their words sound like ours: "The doctors can do no more. It's time to come." That's what we say. It's what Mary and Martha said to Jesus. They wanted Him to come. Perhaps He would only come to offer His respects. But the sisters hoped for something more. They had heard, perhaps also seen, the miraculous things Jesus had done for others; how He had healed the blind, the lame, the deaf, those who had devils and diseases. "Even though the doctors are helpless," they thought to themselves, "Jesus can make a difference."

But Jesus did not come right away. John says He remained where He was for two more days. Then, and only then, did Jesus go to Lazarus' bedside. Only by then, Jesus wasn't going to a friend's sickbed, nor to a deathbed, but to the gravesite of His friend...

Yet Jesus came! Later than they had first hoped, but He came. And He came as their Friend, their Lord, their Saviour. You see, Jesus' purpose is not the world's purpose. The world only knows what it sees and feels. The world wants help for the here and now, not later. The world wants the best life now.

But Jesus did not come to give us a few more years, or weeks, or days. Jesus came to give us life that is forever, unending, death-free. That's why Jesus waited. He explained as much to His disciples: ***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.***

This is the purpose of all that Jesus said and did. St. John finishes His Gospel with this purpose in mind: ***these (things) are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.*** It's the same reason that God had His prophet Ezekiel speak His Word to a valley of dry, dead bones, and bring them to life as a great army of His people. ***I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.*** God's Word has power, not just over the problems of this life, but over death itself. God speaks His Word to create faith and to bring what is promised to that faith – life in Him, not just now but forever.

Death has a different take with Jesus. That's why the Introit for this Fifth Sunday in Lent begins with that wondrous verse from Psalm 116: ***Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.*** How is the death of His saints precious? That ***the Son of God may be glorified through it;*** that is, that by His dying death for us, with all the pain that could ever be known in the world, He has destroyed the power of death over us. That is, that by His rising, alive and infinitely well, on the first day of the week, He has become the Resurrection Leader, the First One Who leads all who follow Him from death into real life, life that is forever...

Some will claim this to be 'pie in the sky' and not helpful at times like the scary ones we face now. Some may say that Lazarus' story is different from where we are – or have been, when we have watched loved ones die – because this story has a happy ending. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead after all! Martha and Mary get their brother back!

On the other hand, I have been asked numerous times if Lazarus was not pleased – even ticked off – that he had to come back to life. After all, soon afterward the Pharisees who want Jesus dead also want Lazarus dead, since he is living, breathing proof of Jesus' Messianic power. We are not told what Lazarus felt; it's a mystery to us. But I think he was rejoicing, since one of the first faces he saw coming from the tomb was Jesus.

We do know that Lazarus had to die again. So did Martha have to die, and Mary too. Sorrow would come again to this household, as it does to all of our households. But

Jesus is there in the sorrow already. And already in the sorrow we are on the road to resurrection.

You see, hope here is not only at the end, when Lazarus is raised. It's in the middle, where Jesus is weeping. It's in the middle where Jesus gives His promise to Martha: ***"Your brother will rise again."*** It's in the middle where Martha believes and confesses already the faith of all God's people from Adam to the end: ***"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."***

It's in the middle that the Word that is Hope and Life forever is given by Jesus: ***"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*** Jesus is the resurrection, Jesus is life, even before He goes to the cross to pay for our resurrection, even before He dies to give us life, even before He rises to show Martha and Mary and Lazarus, and you, that He is Everything you could ever want or need.

And in the middle already is the end result: ***Yes Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, Who is coming into the world.*** This is the end result also in our time, in your life, to believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God Who came into the world for you. In Him you live, even in the midst this ever-more-clearly dying world. In the middle of this waiting and waning world, you are on the road to resurrection.

That may cause us, especially in these days, to think upon and remember with thanksgiving those sisters and brothers we have known but who are not with us now, those in the Church Triumphant, like Lazarus and Martha and Mary, all those sainted ones of your congregation, from your family, who don't have to see these daunting days. Nevertheless, in Christ, Who is the Resurrection already, we are one with them and with all the faithful He has called to be His own. Apart from them, we are still together, and so grieving, we still rejoice, and dying, we still live.

There is one thing we are experiencing differently. Mary and Martha had time to say goodbye to their brother; he was sick for days. It doesn't always go that way. Sometimes death is sudden, and unforeseen, and can't be prepared for. My father died almost two years ago of a heart attack, suddenly, in a moment. One of the sorrows for my mother is that she did not get to say goodbye to him. That sorrow will be perfectly relieved in the resurrection on the last day; that sorrow is already relieved by Jesus Who is with us now as the resurrection and the life.

But maybe that is why our anxious grief is now felt across our synod. We didn't get to say good-bye. It's the Fifth Sunday in Lent, but also the second Sunday in lock-down. And it all happened so fast – the public health announcements, the government

decisions, the mandated closures. We didn't have a chance to say good-bye, or see you soon. One of the joys of Christ's church is the fellowship that is real, of which the Psalmist sings: *The righteous will surround me, for You will deal bountifully with me.*

For a time, our Lenten fast includes the fasting from the concrete, physical communion of saints, the joy of gathering with fellow redeemed sinners in Christ.

Yet we are still His church, still His people on the road to resurrection. Jesus is here also in this sorrow. We are joined to Him, as members of the body to the Head; and we are therefore joined still to one another in our holy resurrection hope. We can't come together like those who came to comfort Martha and Mary – no hugs, no close greetings, just social distance. Yet we walk through this intensified Lent with the Hope of Easter, the hope of the resurrection leaping up in the middle of it.

Even before the end of our story, of Christ's story, we have joy.

Here we see Jesus' compassion and love in the middle of the grief. Here we heed His Word of promise that puts and keeps us on the road to resurrection. Amen.