

Jesus, Our Life
John 11:17-27, 38-53
Lent 5

The Word of the Lord from John 11: “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.” (John 11:25-26).

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

In the middle of winter, even a well-managed cemetery is a terribly bleak place to visit. It isn't designed to be this way: trees and shrubs and flowers are carefully planted to give color and beauty to the resting place of loved ones, to a site of mourning and grief. But winter comes with its cold winds and freezing temperatures, with snow and ice. Life retreats: green disappears, the lawns turn brown, leaves fall, and branches look like deadened sticks while the gravestones stand sentry and time goes on. For those weeks of winter, it is a place where all seems dead.

But it is not so. Though sometimes it seems like it will never happen, the sun will rise higher with warmth and light, and the cemetery will be more a like a garden again. Throughout the winter, those trees and shrubs and lawns are not dead forever; they are merely dormant, waiting for the sun to bring them back to life.

With that, the Lord teaches us an important lesson: what is true for the trees is also true for the people of God who rest from their labors. The Son of God comes to bring them back to life.

I. The Glory of God at the Tomb of Lazarus

The Son of God arrives at Bethany late. His friend Lazarus has been ill for a while, but Jesus has delayed. Now Lazarus is dead, buried in the tomb for four long days. The number may have some serious significance: ancient rabbis are known to have taught that the soul of the dead hovered over their bodies for three days, then departed for good. Lazarus isn't just dead: he's gone. It would take more than the usual miracle (whatever that might be!) to bring him back now.

Lazarus has two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha goes out to meet Jesus; and she gives a curious confession of faith. She says, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” She's absolutely right: she knows that Jesus has the power to heal, and that He could have saved Lazarus while he was still alive. At the same time, though, it appears she sees Jesus' power as weaker than death: she thinks that while Jesus can heal people who still have life, He cannot give life where there is none left. She goes on to say, “But even now I know that whatever You ask from God, God will give You;” but her words throughout this text indicate she's put limits on the “whatever.” She doesn't believe that Jesus can bring Lazarus back to life.

Jesus tells her otherwise. He says, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha thinks she knows what He means, so she says, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Here is an error to keep in mind, dear friends: the Last Day will raise nobody from the dead. The Last Day is simply the last day. It is Jesus who raises from the dead, because Jesus is the Conqueror of death. The dead will rise on the Last Day because He raises them then. And if Jesus chooses to raise the dead on another

day, He can do that too. His power is not chained to the Last Day: wherever He is, whenever He is, He is the Lord of life.

This is what He proclaims to Martha: “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?” She responds, “Yes, Lord; I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” She doesn’t know what all that means. But she trusts that Jesus is the Savior.

Jesus goes to the tomb, deeply moved and weeping. Behold your Savior, who empathizes with His people. Even though He knows that He will raise Lazarus from the dead, He hurts with Mary and Martha because they hurt, and they are His beloved children—as are you. He arrives at the tomb and commands that the stone be taken away. Martha objects—Lazarus is dead, and his body has only corrupted more in the past four days. Why make that any more evident?

Hear Jesus’ answer: “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” The glory of God is about to be displayed at the tomb of Lazarus. This is the glory of the triune God, for Jesus prays aloud so that people might know that the Father is in on the miracle, too, that He has sent His Son to do His work and will. Having made that clear, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.”

And Lazarus comes out of the tomb. Just like that. Just because Jesus spoke and told him to. That’s the glory of God on display: Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. Where He is, life is, because He gives life; and He gives life by His Word. He speaks and tells Lazarus to live, and Lazarus lives again.

Of those who hear and see the miracle, many believe; but some go and tell the Pharisees what Jesus has done. The Pharisees convene the Council to discuss this miraculous sign and ask “What are we to do?” Listen to their fear: “If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him.” Can’t have that: sinners just can’t put up with people believing in the Son of God, who gives them eternal life. The Pharisees think they have a legitimate fear, though: they’re afraid that if everyone believes in Jesus, it will provoke the Romans to wipe them out as a nation. In other words, Jesus might have proven that He’s greater than death, but that doesn’t mean He’s greater than Caesar and his armies. This is nothing but the blindness of unbelief: if Christ is greater than death, would He not be greater than Rome?

And even if it were God’s will that Rome level Jerusalem, wouldn’t it be better to give up a city on earth in order to follow the One who raises the dead to everlasting life?

No. Not to the Pharisees, anyway. They would rather sacrifice Jesus in order to hold onto a place that they’re eventually going to lose anyway. That is the nature of sin, to clutch at what you can’t keep in order to rob you of what you can’t lose.

It’s Caiaphas who voices this: he says, “It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” Sacrifice the One to save the many. That’s their decision. It’s very pragmatic.

Unwittingly, it’s also very prophetic. From here on out, the Pharisees actively plan to put Jesus to death, believing that they’ll save the nation by killing the man. They have no idea. God will use their evil for the good of all: when their plan is finally carried out on the cross, the death of Jesus won’t

serve to get Him out of the way, dead and gone. The death of Jesus will be the Sacrifice for the sins of the people—all the people, both Jews and Gentiles. Because He dies on that cross for the sins of the world, and because He rises again on the third day, His promise rings out to all the world: “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.”

2. Where Jesus, There Life

Many of you mourn right now. In the past year, you may have said good-bye to your friends and loved ones.

I pray that this text gives you comfort. Christ has died and Christ is risen from the dead. He is the Conqueror of death. He is not the Resurrection and the Life only in the past, as if He retired from that after raising Lazarus from the dead. He is not the Resurrection and the Life only in the future, on the Last Day. He is the Resurrection and the Life now. Now, and forevermore.

Where Jesus is, life is. That’s what Jesus is about: and whenever He is present forgiving sins, He is also present giving life. By His forgiveness, He already declares that eternal life is yours, for He has done all to accomplish it by His death and resurrection. At your baptism, Jesus declared, “Come out! Come out of the bondage of sin, for I make you My beloved child this day! Come out of the darkness of sin, for I am the Light of the world! Come out of death, for I am the Resurrection and the Life—and I make you alive forever by water and the Word.” Your resurrection at the Baptismal font was a greater miracle than the one of Lazarus at the tomb: Jesus gave physical life back to Lazarus’ body, and that life would be lost again—Lazarus’ body would die again. Jesus has given eternal life to you: you already have it. Unless the Lord returns, your body will eventually die. Your soul will not: you are alive forever, and the Lord will raise your body up, too, on the Last Day.

Where Jesus is, life is. And whenever He is present forgiving sins, He is also present giving life. His Word gives life. He spoke to bring Lazarus back from death. He put His words in Ezekiel’s mouth, and those words made dry bones alive. This day, He speaks His forgiveness to you. These are not empty words: they give you life. They renew that eternal life in you once again.

Where Jesus is, life is. And whenever He is present forgiving sins, He is also present giving life. It is likewise true at His Supper. He is present, for He gives you His very body and blood—and He gives it for the forgiveness of sins. He gives it to keep you alive—for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

This is true for you. It is also true for those you mourn who died in the faith. Those who died in the faith are not dead, because the Lord is not the Lord of the dead but of the living. Their bodies rest in the grave for now, but they live even now with Christ in heaven. You have His promise: “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.” It is true for the saints who have gone before us, and it is true for you.

Be on guard, then, against the devil’s temptations which would steal this life away. Beware of the error of Martha, who thought that Jesus’ power was great but limited, really only good for working wonders where life remained. In doing so, she thought Jesus weaker than death instead of greater;

and she thought Jesus weaker than life rather than being life. You will constantly be tempted to believe that Jesus is good for helping out in this life, but nothing more than that. The danger here is twofold. On the one hand, you'll have no hope for eternity, because you'll think that Jesus is only good for improving this ride for as long as it lasts. On the other hand, you'll be terribly disappointed in Jesus because life tends only to get harder and more difficult as time goes along, and you'll think that Jesus' power to improve things is very low indeed. It is not Jesus' power that is low, but your expectations. He has not come to make life a little sweeter on your way to eternal death and grave. He has come to deliver you from eternal death and grave. In His will and wisdom, that may not mean an easy life here at all. But it does mean that He will raise you up from this world of sin and death to life everlasting. Commit all things to the Lord, of course, including your needs of daily bread for this life; but know and rejoice most of all that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, and that everyone who lives and believes in Him will never die.

Beware the sin of the Pharisees, who would rather kill Christ and forfeit life in order to cling to a nation they couldn't keep anyway. Some of you are tempted by sins even now that have you thinking you'd rather hold onto them rather than repent and be forgiven. These are sins like greed and lust and pride and immorality, where you believe that giving them up would hurt too much, so you'd rather Jesus shut up and go away instead. With such sins, you are clutching onto things that are killing you, things

that you will eventually lose. With such sins, you are rejecting Christ and His life which will never fail, but which endures for eternity. In Mark 8, Jesus declares, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:36-38). To cling to your sin is to be ashamed of His Word. To be ashamed of His Word is to reject Him and the life that He gives. Do not cling to things you will lose and sins that haven't killed you yet only because the Lord gives you time to repent. Repent, because the Lord of life has died your death and is risen again to forgive you. He is present to forgive you.

And where Jesus is, life is. Do not despair, repentant people of God. Whatever sins you have clung to in the past, He has died for them all; and He promises "everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die." This promise is for you. It is for all the penitent people of God who have died in the faith.

In the springtime, a well-managed cemetery is a pretty place. The lawns turn green, the trees leaf and the flowers bloom as the sun restores life with light and warmth. It can be a lovely garden. But the renewed foliage is only a hint, only a shadow. Martin Luther once said that, for the Christian, a cemetery is not the final resting place of the dead, a place of dry bones. It is a place of planted kernels, sown seeds. Those who died in the faith are alive with Christ even as they await the resurrection of their bodies; and on the Last Day, the Lord will bring forth those bodies in the ultimate restoration of life as He calls His people from the grave. For Christ will return in glory; and where Jesus is, life is. That is your hope for you and for all who die in Christ. He is the Resurrection and the Life, and He has given that life to you, because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.