

5th Sunday in Lent
March 29, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Life Wins Through Jesus

John 11:17–27 (NIV84)

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Unless you have isolated yourself from every form of news in the past weeks you have probably heard this over and over again. Each day, and maybe more than once each day, reports are released. How many have been infected? How many have been tested? And the big one – How many have died? We humans seem to be fascinated with the death count. In the 1960’s the count of US. soldiers wounded and killed in Vietnam was daily news. And now we get daily updates about the novel corona virus deaths. As the numbers add up in a death count, so does the fear and concern and anxiety. It seems like death is winning in this world, and not just in the Year of our Lord, 2020. Death has been around for thousands of years, since Adam and Eve sinned. The physical death count became real to them when Cain murdered his brother Abel. And ever since, death seems to have the upper hand in this world. But death will not win. Life wins in the end. Today’s account of the death and resurrection of Lazarus shows us how life wins through Jesus Christ.

The Death Count

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.

The death count in the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus was one. But one is more than enough.

Humans have come to accept that life does not last on this earth forever. When someone gets to a certain age, we expect that their life on earth will come to an end. But Lazarus was not of that certain age. He got sick. They sent a messenger to bring Jesus to see his friend Lazarus and heal him. But Jesus did not come immediately. He waited days before traveling to Bethany. And he arrived too late to heal Lazarus and too late to even say good bye – four days too late to be exact. To all those who came to comfort Mary and Martha from Jerusalem, death had won.

But maybe not to Martha. Recall the time when Jesus visited their home earlier. Mary was listening to Jesus teach and Martha was busy with all the preparations. Martha was even upset that Mary was not helping her but was instead listening to Jesus. Well, Martha must have listened to Jesus too. She gives an amazing confession of faith in Jesus when he arrives four days too late to heal her brother.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Of course, Jesus could have healed Lazarus. He has given the blind their sight and healed many before this. No disease was too difficult for Jesus to overcome. But Martha is not defeated by the death of her brother. She still hopes in Jesus. She still trusts that something good can happen during this time of mourning for her brother.

When people are scared and nervous and anxious and feeling down around us, can we be like Martha? Can we show our hope and faith in Christ in any and every situation? When it looks like death is winning, people need hope. The only one to give hope in the face of death is Jesus Christ. While we do not expect miracles like the raising of Lazarus today, we do know where Jesus sits. He is at the right hand of God and is interceding for us. He is sitting in the seat of all power in heaven and is working all things for the eternal benefit of his believers. God the Father will certainly give Jesus whatever he asks. Martha believes this and so do we.

She also believes this:

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

The disciples had trouble seeing past this earthly life. They were looking for an earthly kingdom, even when Jesus ascended into heaven. But Martha had been listening to Jesus. She was looking forward to the resurrection at the last day. Standing there with Jesus, four days after her brother died, Martha was confident that her brother would live again. While Martha certainly mourned her brother’s death, she did not despair. There is hope with Jesus, even when death seems to end hope.

Might this be a time in our country and the world when people are looking for and needing hope for the future? And not the immediate future, but the eternal future. We have that hope in Christ, just as Martha did. No evil in this world take away the certain hope of the resurrection on the last day. You have an opportunity now to confess this hope you have with your family and those you communicate with. People might just be ready to listen to the good news of Jesus when they are mostly hearing bad news in the world.

Listen to the faith Martha confesses next!

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

We think of the great confession of faith Peter made when he said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the

Living God.” But Peter was not under emotional stress when he made this confession. When he was asked to confess Christ in the courtyard of the high priest when Jesus was arrested, Peter denied Jesus three times. Martha stands before the One who could have healed her brother if he had arrived sooner. She is still in mourning. Jesus said “Whoever believes in me will never die.” Lazarus believed in Jesus but Martha’s brother is still in the grave. But Martha does not look at the outward situation. She trusts the words of Jesus and confesses that Jesus is the “Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

How difficult to trust the words of Jesus when our eyes and emotions tell us something different. Believers, we may have days when we confidently trust our Savior in spite of outward situations to the contrary. And then we have days when we are down, anxious, worried and not sure of anything. Martha had great faith in Jesus, but don’t feel guilty if your faith doesn’t always match hers. In fact, her faith falters too.

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

It was one thing to have faith and hope in Christ while away from the tomb. It is quite another for Martha when standing at the tomb of her brother. The reality of that stone and the bad odor that is certainly inside pushes her earlier statements of faith to the background. She said God would do anything Jesus asked but now that Jesus asks for the tomb to be opened, she hesitates and attempts to persuade Jesus to stop.

Friends, don’t be hard on yourself for having a bad faith day. Our emotions are up and down. Our confidence in Jesus’ promises goes up and down. Now, listen carefully to this next statement so you don’t misunderstand me. Your faith does not save you. Faith IN JESUS save you. No matter what Martha’s faith was like, Jesus was going to do what he needed to do. Her faith would not save her brother. Jesus would raise Lazarus to life.

The Life Count

Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Jesus is all about life. He is into the life count, not the death count. Jesus gives physical life back to Lazarus by calling his name. Even before this amazing miracle, Jesus promised he would do this for all people on the Last Day.

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out. (John 5:28-29)

He will raise all the dead on the last day by calling all with his own voice, just as he did for Lazarus. What a day that will be! A day when life triumphs over death and death is no more for those who believe in Christ. For Christ promises eternal life to believers in him.

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. (John 5:24–25)

Jesus gives spiritual and eternal life to those who trusted in him that day. Those mourners from Jerusalem came to comfort Mary and Martha. But they end up being the ones to receive the real and lasting comfort of Christ. They hear the confession of faith Martha makes during her mourning. And then they see Jesus call Lazarus to life. Now they are alive and will rise to eternal life one day.

In one verse not included in the selected verses for today's Gospel, we hear what Jesus thought of death. It is that short verse that simply tells us, "Jesus wept." Jesus doesn't like death either. So he did all that was necessary to give life to the countless number of people who have lived in this world. Jesus suffered death for all. One death to give life through the forgiveness of sins. One death to give life eternal to countless people from every tribe and language and nation and people. And then Jesus rose. One life to give us the certain hope of eternal life. Jesus has won. Life wins through Jesus.

Amen.