

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 2020

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life

John 11:21–27

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask from God, God will give You.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” (vv 21–27)

In the midst of life we are in death.

These words keep ringing in my ears.

*In the midst of life we are in death; from whom can we seek help?
From You alone, O Lord, who by our sins are justly angered.
Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and merciful Savior,
deliver us not into the bitterness of eternal death.*

Praying these words, I’ve led caskets from the hearse to the grave, with grieving family and friends trailing after.

*Lord, You know the secrets of our hearts;
shut not Your ears to our prayers, but spare us, O Lord.
Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and merciful Savior,
deliver us not into the bitterness of eternal death.*

We pray for a blessed end. We pray to die in faith.

*O worthy and eternal Judge,
do not let the pains of death turn us away from You at our last hour.*

*Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and merciful Savior,
deliver us not into the bitterness of eternal death.*

It's an old prayer. These words go back at least as far as a fourteenth-century hymn. It was sung in a time when plagues were frequent and body counts were unfathomable. It was a prayer to God for aid and help in times of public need. In times like ours.

In life, we are in death.

That's what Mary and Martha felt when their brother Lazarus became sick, and when the sickness led to death, and when death took them to the grave. There they laid his body, and a stone was rolled across the entrance.

This is how it goes among us: life then death. Life chased and hounded and surrounded and overshadowed by death, until the grave finally swallows our loved ones.

But that's not how it is with Jesus. He sees through the grave. He sees beyond death. **"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,"** He says, **"but I go to awaken him"** (v 11). He means that Lazarus has died, yet with Jesus death is but a sleep. The soul of the Christian returns to God while the body sleeps in the grave, and after sleep comes the awakening, the rising, the new day in the endless world to come.

Martha hears that Jesus is coming. She can't see what He sees. She doesn't know what He knows. But she knows what could have been. **"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask from God, God will give you"** (vv 21–22). Maybe even a miracle, maybe as a mighty man sent from God He could ask for that? But still, she's honest. She blames Him for not coming sooner, for not stopping it when He could have.

Too little, too late. That's what it feels like.

If only they had practiced more hand washing, more social distancing, quarantining and isolation, her brother would not have died.

But we know that's not true. By our efforts, we may be able to delay death, to postpone its time, but death will come. **The wages of sin is death** (Rom 6:23), in good economies and in bad ones. It's unlikely that anyone alive on earth at this moment will still be alive in a hundred and twenty years.

"Your brother will rise again," Jesus says (v 23).

Martha believes it. **“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day”** (v 24). She believes in the general resurrection, when the bodies of all who have died will be raised, and those who believe will receive eternal life. But that’s not what she hoped for. She wanted a special miracle, but she would have to wait.

Then Jesus utters these words: **“I am the resurrection and the life.** I don’t need to ask God for this. Martha, do you realize I am death’s destruction? That’s who I am standing right before you. I am death’s worst nightmare. Listen to My promise: **“He who believes in Me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die”** (vv 25–26). The first half points to the general resurrection, but the second half points to a reality that no one has to wait for. **Whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.** The life that Christ gives those who believe in Him cannot be taken away by death. Lazarus, for whom she mourns, is already alive in Jesus.

IN THE MIDST OF DEATH, JESUS IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.

Jesus takes the power of resurrection and the promise of life and buries it in His own flesh. This Jesus, the one who is speaking to you right now, He *is* the resurrection and the life for you.

With Jesus, it’s not life then death but death then life.

“Do you believe this?” (v 26). Yes, I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

So they go to the grave. Stone cannot stop the resurrection and the life. **“Lazarus, come out!”** (v 43). The voice of the Son of God calls him from the tomb. Grave clothes and linen wrappings cannot stop the resurrection and the life. **“Unbind him, and let him go”** (v 44). Death loosens its grip. It’s power is drawing to an end. **“An hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself”** (Jn 5:25–26).

For this, they will seek to kill Jesus. **“It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish”** (v 50). And so He will. In the very midst of life the cords of death surround Him! He who is the resurrection and the life meets the enemy face-to-face. He is wrapped in linen. He is laid in the tomb.

But on the third day: **I am the resurrection and the life.**

He rose from the dead. He has taken death captive. He makes it serve His purposes.

At the grave, standing over a casket, we commit our loved ones to the earth “in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subdue all things to Himself.”

In the midst of death, we are in Christ.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ
Jesus.

Phil 4:7
