

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2023

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

Between Death and Resurrection

John 11:1–45

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

Eph 1:2

Jesus said of Lazarus, **“This illness doesn’t lead to death. It’s for the glory of God, so that the Son of Man may be glorified through it”** (v 4).

Lazarus was ill (v 2)—Lazarus of Bethany. Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha. Lazarus, friend whom the Lord loved. *That* Lazarus.

You can see the big picture from where you sit. You can look at the whole thing from above and beyond and outside the story. John’s Gospel gives you an omniscient third-person perspective on Lazarus and his illness—a divine perspective. What I mean is that you already know how it ends. You also know what happens in the middle. And you even know what Jesus says when He first hears about Lazarus being sick: **“This illness doesn’t lead to death. It’s for the glory of God, so that the Son of Man may be glorified through it”** (v 4). There you have the mind of Jesus. This is how He thinks about Lazarus’s illness: It doesn’t lead to death. It’s for the glory of God. The Son of Man will be glorified through it. Treasure this perspective.

Treasure this perspective because you don’t get this perspective on your own life. You only see your story through your own eyes. You *don’t* get to see the big picture. No one does. When your loved one becomes sick, you don’t get an omniscient third-person view of it. You certainly don’t know how it’ll end. And you’ve got no idea what’ll happen in the middle. And you may not even be all that clear about the beginning. And you don’t get to hear what Jesus says about your particular situation. There’s a lot you don’t know.

In other words, when it comes to Lazarus we know more than Mary and Martha. We’ve got the whole chapter! But when it comes to our own lives and our loved ones, we’re no better off than they were. We’ve got as little understanding about what’s going on as they did—maybe a verse here, a section there, but that’s it.

So what do Mary and Martha know? They know their brother's ill, and they know Jesus loves him. So they do the same thing you and I do. They send a message to Jesus—a prayer: **“Lord, he whom You love is ill”** (v 3). They send the message, the plea, and then wait. . . . and wait . . . and wait. And the questions start to pile up. You know them: Where is He? Why isn't He here yet? When's He gonna come and make it all better?

Meanwhile, Lazarus's health deteriorates. The illness became severe. His fever spikes. Where's Jesus? He loses consciousness. They do what they can. It isn't much. If only the Lord would come! They hold his hand. They pray. They sing the Psalms. Finally, through tears, they say: “Goodbye, Lazarus.” “I love you, Lazarus.” “Don't leave us!” But he does. Lazarus is dust, and to dust he returns, just like it says in Genesis. And their lives go on. They sleep and rise the next day and the next day and the next day, but Lazarus doesn't.

And where is Jesus? They don't know. They can't call Him or text Him. All they know through that time is silence. Absence. Darkness. Death. You've been Mary and Martha. Maybe you're Mary and Martha right now. Heartbroken. Disappointed. Angry. Why did he have to die and leave me? Why didn't I do more? Why didn't the doctors figure it out? Why didn't Jesus come and make it better?

If only . . . that's what they say when Jesus finally shows up, after **Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days** (v 17). It might as well have been twenty years. **“Lord, if only you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died”** (v 21). Martha says. And Mary: **“Lord, if only you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died”** (v 32). If only He'd responded sooner, moved more quickly, cared a little more. If only He worked on my time instead of His time—whatever His time is—then Lazarus wouldn't have died. Couldn't it end some other way than the tomb? Why can't life be more like a fairy tale—where the dragons, the monsters, and the witches die and everyone else lives “happily ever after”?

Martha does know there's more. She says, **“Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you”** (v 22). Mary wasn't the only one who'd sat at Jesus' feet and listened! What an amazing statement! What confidence in her Lord! She believes in Him—in His deep connection to God and His divine power. And she trusts Him—trusts Him through her grief, her disappointment, her anger. What else can she do? What else can you do?

Because this is where you are, too, or where you've been before, or where you'll be some day in the future—somewhere between “Lazarus is ill” and the end that's a new beginning. You've got the same promise that Jesus gives to Martha: **“Your brother will**

rise again” (v 23). And that’s a great comfort. A great comfort and a precious promise, but it doesn’t fill the hole you’ve got right now. It doesn’t wipe away the tears today. It doesn’t remove the pain instantly. It’s more like taking a medication that’ll fix things in the long run but doesn’t immediately remove the symptoms. So take it. Even if the symptoms continue, it’ll do you good.

“I know,” Martha says. **“I know that he’ll rise again in the resurrection on the Last Day.** But, still—what about today? What about right now? What about all the years I’ve got between now and then?” (v 24).

“I AM the Resurrection and the Life,” Jesus says. **“Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die”** (vv 25–26). It’s as if Jesus says, “Have you forgotten who I AM? I AM the Living Bread, the Light of the world, the Gate, the Good Shepherd, the Way and the Truth and the Life, the True Vine. I AM the Wine Maker, the Sick Healer, the Bread Multiplier, the Water Walker, and the Sight Giver. I AM the bone setter, the ligament joiner, the skin grafter, the heart starter, the spirit breather, the death reverser, the body raiser, the Last Day. And I AM today, right now, here, in all the time and space between death and resurrection—for him and for you.”

Martha said: **“Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you”** (v 22). Does she know what she’s asking? Do you know? Do you understand what it’s going to cost? What this will require of Jesus? Because the grave doesn’t just give up its dead. It doesn’t say, “Oh, sure, you can have this one back.” The resurrection and the life don’t come cheap. The grave demands a body. Sin demands its wages.

So they go to the tomb. Jesus weeps. He’s deeply moved and greatly troubled. Why? Because He hates death and what it does to us. He despises the way it separates us. He grieves the pain it causes us. And for the same reason that His sweat falls like drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane—because of what He’s got to do to make the grave give up the dead. **“Take away the stone,”** Jesus says (v 39). But keep that stone handy—it’ll be needed again soon. So they take it away. And when He had given thanks, **He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”** And **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”** (vv 43–44). “O death, let him go! Take me, and give him back. My body for his body. Bind Me and lay Me in there. What you unwind from Lazarus, you might as well just wind around Me. I’ll enter the tomb. Let’s see what death can do with the resurrection and the life! Let’s see how it handles the coming of the Last Day!” When Lazarus comes out, Good Friday is right around the corner. You can draw a straight line from the raising of Lazarus to the death of Jesus.

Lazarus lives. Jesus dies. Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, son of Mary. Jesus, friend of Lazarus and your friend, too. *That* Jesus.

This is the big picture. This is what it looks like from above and beyond. This is the divine perspective. This illness doesn't lead to death, though it does go through death. It's for the glory of God. It leads to our communion with that glory. Truly, the Son of Man is glorified by it—with a glory hidden in His own cross and grave. One man dies that all might live.

Dear friends, He calls you to live! He calls you out of the grave! He calls you to step out of the garments of death and into a life that we've barely even begun to live. Even if you've got one foot in the grave, you can hear Him calling, pulling you out with the power of His own voice, willing you to live not in sin and death but in the resurrection and the life. First for the soul. And then for the body. Yes, we're in the middle of that story now, but we do know how it ends—for us and for all who have died in Christ: With the stone rolled away, the grave cloths folded up, both feet out of the grave, and, yes, life happily ever after.

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

Phil 4:7