

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
St. John 11:1-53

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The season of Lent is coming to its conclusion, and as has been done throughout the season, you are being confronted with your own mortality and new life, whether you realize it or not: the temptation of Jesus, Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind. This time, you see your mortality in the events of the little town of Bethany. The wages of sin is death, and Lazarus has received payment; he was lying in the tomb, his body rotting and decaying as the physical effect of sin took its toll—lying there four days, a bad odor had no doubt formed.

Yet, it is not only Lazarus' life that flashes before your eyes. Jesus was nearing the end of His life on earth. As chapter 10 of St. John's Gospel comes to a close, the Feast of Dedication had just taken place—Jesus was in Jerusalem for Hanukkah; it was December by today's calendar. In about three months, Jesus would return to Jerusalem to be "delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified." (Matthew 20:18b-19a) He went to fulfill the will of His Father, Who desires all men to be saved (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4), and die as the once-for-all sin offering.

As I've been saying, in the death of Lazarus and the sacrifice of Jesus, you see your own mortality. Like Lazarus, you are sinners, and the wages of sin is death. One day, these bodies will return to the dust from which they were created. Following that, you are confronted with the gut-wrenching truth that the sin which will claim these mortal bodies is the same sin that condemned Jesus to death. Jesus bore the full wrath of God for you, in your place, on your behalf—however you may want to word it—so that you would not have to.

Still, there is hope, because Jesus is present. There is hope because of who Jesus is! And that was the case in Bethany, too.

After spending some time in the wilderness where John used to baptize, Jesus made His way to the little town of Bethany. He was met on the way by Lazarus' sister, Martha, who heard that He was on His way. What she said is astounding: "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." It sounds like a round-about or sugar-coated way of asking for a miracle—a resurrection. However, I would suggest that she was praying a portion of a petition of the Our Father? "Lord, you could have kept Lazarus alive, but your will be done!" Or, fast forward to the night in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." (Mark 14:36) "Lord, I wish you could have been here to keep Lazarus alive; yet not my will, but yours be done."

Here's the hope since Jesus was present—these words of Jesus: "Your brother will rise again." And Martha, who was once concerned that Mary was not helping her serve a meal (cf. Luke 10:40), understood what He was saying, though not completely: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Recall that Jesus had previously told 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." No, Lazarus will not only rise at the last day, but He would be raised back to life that day, to the glory of God the Father and God the Son.

In a few months, Jesus would return to Jerusalem to give His life as a ransom for many. Like Lazarus, He would be wrapped in linens and perfumed. Like Lazarus, He would be placed into a rock-hewn grave. Like Lazarus, He would be sealed in His grave by a large stone laid across the entrance. But as you well know and will no doubt be reminded of again in two weeks, Jesus did not remain dead and in the grave. Like Lazarus, the Son of God would be raised to life. The Son of God would be raised back to life and give hope to all who believe on His name!

So, what can be said of His glory? To quote Him: "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." So, what Jesus asked Martha can be asked of you, as well. "Do you believe this?"

It's time for some personal honesty. One can easily become discouraged, even to the point of despair, doubt, and unbelief; to the point of hopelessness. "Do you believe this?" The trials and events of the sinful life can lead you to the point when you say, "I'm not sure anymore," or, frightfully, "No."

One need look no further than right here, in the church, in this congregation. There are many Sundays and especially Wednesdays here that the congregation could fit comfortably in a building half this size...or smaller. You can look at all the empty seats and wonder if there must have been a time when many more of them were filled—and some of you may remember when there were regularly fewer empty seats. There had to have been a time when there was a need for as much room as this.

What's the reason? Well, I'd be lying to you and myself if I even assumed to have **the** answer, for there are almost certainly many reasons. But these could be but a few of them: older members die and there just aren't the number of youth that there used to be because they have moved away, left the church, or simply because families are smaller these days than just 50 years ago. It is certainly easier to stay home an extra day—sleep in two days a week—given the hectic work week many people have these days. There is unresolved conflict between a member and the pastor or a previous pastor or another member and the member refuses to come to worship as a result. Illness and infirmity can also have an effect. The list can, undoubtedly, go on and on.

Of course, the effects of this are easy to see. It becomes more and more difficult to fill council positions. Constitution and by-laws may need to be overlooked and amended with regard to term limits just to keep positions filled. Offering numbers decline as attendance declines. Sunday school classes are combined, or may have already been reduced to one or none. Ultimately, the congregation may have to close. And before anyone here succumbs to PLOM disease—poor little, ol' me—I'm not singling out this congregation or trying to predict the path down which this congregation will be going; these are issues facing a great number of congregations, within and without the LCMS. Consequently, you should draw some consolation from that.

And it is certainly not only church matters that can cause one to become discouraged. Look at the political and moral climate of the country...of the world. Or there are personal setbacks such as the loss of a job, the loss of a family member or friend, or the loss of your health. With the loss of so much, it is easy to lose all hope, and once again, your own mortality becomes all the more apparent.

You live in a world torn apart by sin, and you struggle with that sin all the time. On your own, that struggle is un-winable.

But there **is** hope. Jesus lives; He may have been crucified, dead and buried, but on the third day He rose again from the dead, and He lives and reigns to all eternity! He is present here, right now, in this place. There may be more empty seats than filled today, but there are still two or more gathered in His name. His Word is faithfully proclaimed in its purity here, God help us. His Sacraments are administered in accordance with the Gospel here. Since all of that is true, and Jesus is truly present in these means of grace, then He is truly present here and now, and He's present for you!

It is by the grace of God that the Word of God was proclaimed to the dead man—"Lazarus, come out"—and he was raised to life. And it is by the grace of God that the Word is proclaimed to men dead in sin—"I forgive you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"—and where there is this forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

By the grace of God, the Word of God was proclaimed to the dead man in the tomb—"Lazarus, come out"—and he was given life. By the same grace of God, the Word of God is proclaimed to the dead men in the font—"I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost"—and they are raised to newness of life.

By the grace of God, the Word of God called to His friend for whom He will die—"Lazarus, come out"—and he received the Life of the world. By the same grace of God, the Word of God calls to His friends for whom He died—"Take and eat...take and drink..."—and they receive the very Body and Blood of the life of the world.

Jesus is alive; He is risen, and He is among you! He is come to bring forgiveness of sins and life and salvation. He is come to bring hope to a hopelessly discouraged people. What is that hope? He says, "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." In other words, "Yes, the wages of sin is death and you are mortal, but I come that you may live, for I have conquered death and given you the victory. Though you may die, yet shall you live by grace through faith." He therefore asks, "Do you believe this?" By the grace of God, despite the worries and sorrows which can discourage, you can answer with Martha, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." He has come and is come to give you hope and peace, peace which the world cannot give, for He has forgiven you or all your sins!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.