

“Believe and Live!”

John 11:1-53

Fifth Sunday in Lent + March 26, 2023

Dear Friends in Christ,

John Chapter 11 is the one of the most wonderful chapters in the whole Bible. The raising of Lazarus from the grave is yet another in a series of miraculous signs that Jesus performed to demonstrate that He is the Christ, the Son of the God, so that you, the hearer, by believing, may have eternal life in His name. There are many sermons that could be preached from this chapter, but since we only have time for one, let us turn to these words of Jesus, another of His famous “I Am” statements: “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?” (vv. 25-26).

— I —

First of all, note that these words are spoken right in the face of death. Jesus is right outside the village of Bethany, on His way to the tomb of his friend Lazarus. From the standpoint of Mary and Martha, the sisters of the dead man, this was a death that could have been avoided. Each of them, when they meet up with Jesus, say the same thing: “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died” (vv. 21, 32). From their point of view, what they said made perfect sense. They knew and no doubt had seen that Jesus healed many other people from diseases and injuries of all kind. They sent word to Jesus as soon as Lazarus became sick. They sent a messenger to find Jesus in the village where He was working and to tell Him, “Lord, He whom You love is ill” (v.3). Mary and Martha and Lazarus were not just casual acquaintances with Jesus. They had welcomed Him in their home, apparently on more than one occasion. They had provided for Him and no doubt His disciples. Remember how Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to His teaching even as Martha worked so hard to serve Jesus?

So what did Jesus do when He got the message that Lazarus was so sick? He first 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” (v.4). Then it says something very strange: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was” (vv.5-6). Did you hear that? Jesus loved them, so He stayed away two days longer. Why didn’t Jesus leave what He was doing and go immediately to help His friends? Why didn’t Jesus just say the word and heal Lazarus from a distance, like He had done on other occasions? Listen to what Jesus said to the disciples after those two days were over: “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him” (vv.14-15). God’s purpose in all this was so that God would be glorified and that the disciples would believe—but all of that must have been little comfort to Mary and Martha as their brother lay dead in the tomb.

No doubt you can think of examples when someone you love grew sick and died. We can think of cases where we prayed earnestly to the Lord, we called on the name of the Lord again and again, perhaps over a period of a long illness. The whole community offered up prayers in the name of Jesus. We prayed with boldness and confidence, just as He commanded us to pray, and we trusted in Him for healing. But the one we loved died, anyway. Perhaps it was someone right in the prime of life, or a young person who we figured had many years left on this earth.

Dear friends, in the very midst of life, death is indeed all around us. Life is a very fragile thing, and every human being of every age is mortal. It is this way because of the sin that is within us. So why doesn’t our heavenly Father deliver us from this? Why doesn’t God rescue us from this horrible condition and give us something better? If He loves us so much, why doesn’t He do something?

Beloved Brothers and Sisters, that is exactly what God has done in sending His Son for us! God has done something: in the person of His Son, He has come to share our mortal life. God’s Son became like us in every way—except without sin. In His 33 years on this earth He no doubt many times tasted the bitter grief of losing someone He loved. Confirmands love John 11:35 because it is the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept.” It demonstrates that Jesus us a genuine human being. And linguists tell us that is really quite a mild translation. Another version says, “Jesus burst into tears” (AAT). And when it

says He was “deeply moved in spirit and greatly troubled” (v.33) we should picture Jesus sobbing and groaning in anguish and deep grief.

And this would not be the last time Jesus would taste death. The Holy Spirit was careful to have recorded for us the fact that Bethany is only about two miles from Jerusalem (v.18). Now, Jesus had raised at least a couple others from the dead—there was that twelve-year-old girl and the young man of the village of Nain—but those were both up north in Galilee, far away from the Jewish authorities in the capital city of Jerusalem. This miracle was witnessed by many people from Jerusalem; it was right in the face of Jesus’ bitterest enemies. Many of the crowd gathered here at the tomb would follow Him and welcome Him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which was just around the corner. But some of those who witnessed the miracle went right to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done (v.46). This information was taken right to the Jewish council and it caused them to put into high gear their plot to have Jesus put to death.

And so it was that Jesus, Son of God, and Son of Man, would be lifted up on the cross. There He would remove, once and for all, all the guilt of all the world’s sin, which is the cause of all death and misery. If there would be life for the human race, this Substitute for the human race must die this death. Even Jesus’ bitter enemy, the high priest Caiaphas, by the Holy Spirit spoke words more true than he knew: “It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.’ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (vv.49-52). Jesus died for all that all might live in Him.

— II —

But Jesus is also true God and the Victor over the grave! He finally comes to the grave and tells them to take the stone away. Martha complains, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days” (v.39). But Jesus convinces them and they agree to open the tomb. Then Jesus prays out loud to the Father so that everyone will know that this miracle is from God. Then Jesus talks to the dead man with a loud voice. He says,

“Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus does! He is still all wrapped up in the burial cloths but works his way out of the tomb. “Unwrap him and let him go,” says Jesus.

Dear friends, this word of Jesus has the same power as the word of the Lord that called the creation into existence at the beginning. And it is the same word of the same God that is still at work when the Gospel is proclaimed today. When you hear the Lord Jesus proclaimed and you are told, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” those words have the same life-giving Lord behind them, so that by His grace you believe those words and by the power of his Holy Spirit you confess His saving name. We have been called out of death to life by the word of Jesus that has given us the gift of faith in Him. It is the same power behind the words of prophecy when Ezekiel spoke to those dry bones and said, “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord” (Ezekiel 37:4).

That is true because Jesus Himself lives. Jesus said, “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.” (vv.25-26). These words would make no sense to us if Jesus had stayed dead. If His bones were dried and decayed in a tomb somewhere, or if Jesus’ body had been burned to ashes and the ashes spread to the four winds—if Jesus had never been heard from again—it would have proven that Jesus is a liar. But Christ has been raised from the dead. Sin, the root of death, has been rooted out. He lives and reigns to all eternity. He is still speaking to us today.

On the Last Day Christ will give the command to all who have died: “Come out!” And those who believe in Him will come out with glorified bodies, ready to live with Him in the perfect world to come. Lazarus had to face death again; but Christ rose from the grave never again to die. And so we will rise.

— III —

Dear friends, there is just one thing that remains. We need to ask the question that Jesus asked Martha: “Do you believe this?” (v.26). I’m asking you today: “Jesus died on the cross to take away your sins. He rose again to obtain eternal life for you. Do you believe this?” Even before Lazarus was raised, Martha answered in faith “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (v.27). This is what we answer

every Sunday when we speak the words of the Creed. After the miracle, many believed in Jesus (v.45). But some did not! Can you imagine? They were eyewitnesses to one of the greatest miracles in history—a man dead in the grave four days and called out alive—and they still did not believe that Jesus was sent from God. It just gave them one more reason to have Jesus killed.

Dear friends, that is the horrible condition of the sinful human heart. May God preserve us and our loved ones from falling into that stubborn, irrational, rejection of the Savior! Instead, may His life-giving word continue to strengthen us with Christ in life and faith—life that will last forever. Believe and live! Amen.