

Written: What the Resurrection Means for COVID-19-John 11:21-27

5th Sunday in Lent

Sunday, March 29th, 2020

Text: John 11:21-27 (Greek Translation)

²¹ Then Martha said to Jesus, "Lord: If you were here earlier then my brother would not have died. ²² Even now I still know that whatever you may ask God, God will give to you." ²³ Jesus says to her, "Your brother will rise from among the dead." ²⁴ Martha says to Him, "I still know that He will rise from the dead in the resurrection on the final day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I myself, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who continues to believe in me, even if he may die, he will live, ²⁶ and everyone who continues to live and believe in me will most certainly never die for eternity. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She says to Him, "Yes Lord, I myself am still believing that You are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who is coming into the world."

Exegetical Statement

Jesus is across the Jordan River at the place where John used to Baptize. He had departed from the Temple where, upon answering the Jews demand to know if He is the Christ, and His answering affirmatively, they sought to kill Him, and He left. Now comes a message that Lazarus is sick, and Mary and Martha are begging Him to come and heal the one He loves like a brother. Jesus loves the whole family with more than brotherly love, but with God's unconditional and sacrificial love. For this reason, out of love for them, for His disciples, for the Jews gathered mourning with the sisters, and for us too, Jesus waits until Lazarus has died. He tells the disciples at first that He is sleeping, knowing that His death is not the death that will end his time on earth. When it is time to go the Disciples try to talk Him out of it afraid that the Jews will make good on their plans to kill Him. Jesus explains that now is daytime, the time that the Father has given Him to work. They are protected from stumbling into any plot as long as it is the Father's time to work. With Thomas as their spokesman they head out ready to die with Him if need be. When He gets near Martha meets Him and like Mary will expresses her angst that He did not come sooner. Jesus tells her that although Lazarus is dead, He is the power of resurrection; both on the final day as well as right now. After she confesses faith in Him as the Christ, the Son of God she sends for Mary. Mary's similar accusation that He could've saved her brother earlier but now its too late, and the sorrow and hopelessness that death brings to loved ones disturbs Jesus in His heart and moves Him to displeasure over this what death is to mankind. He responds by first thanking the Father for hearing Him and that this prayer is to affirm that He has been sent by the Father to do His work. Then He commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb. After this Jesus commands they unwrap the grave clothes and let him go.

Focus Statement:

Lazarus death was not because of any certain sin, but the sinful condition of humanity that brings death. Jesus proves that He came to take away the power of sin over our lives; ad with that the power of death. Although our bodies will die, that doesn't happen against God's will and plan for us. And because in our flesh He died our death, we know by faith He will call us out of the tomb as He did with Lazarus, into a world where sickness and death are no more.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Death is the thing that scares us most about COVID-19, our death, and the death of our loved ones. We fear living without them and we fear their having to live without us. We see our life is in our hands and are afraid we can't do enough to fend off a virus we can't see coming.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Give our fear of death over to Jesus. While we are not to have a death wish, we can live without fear of death. When we seek to do His will and repent for the times we do not, we are assured that He will protect us and enable us to remain serving Him until the time He designates we have finished our work, and it's time to come home.

Subject Sentence: Death cannot defeat Jesus's resurrection

The past couple Sundays we've had sermons with Biblical themes aimed at how the COVID-19 virus is affecting our lives, and how and where we should see God in all of this. Two Sunday's ago, we talked about how this virus forces us to see that, although we can provide for our temporal needs under normal circumstances, there are things in this fallen world that are beyond our power to handle. The LORD uses such things as COVID-19 to turn our eyes back onto Him by faith. Last Sunday we talked about how the world in its spiritual blindness lives in panic and fear, and that we too are affected by the same fear as we watch the spread of the Virus in our county. But Jesus has come to replace that fear with faith in Him, and continues to pour His love into our hearts from the cross, through His Spirit. His love has the power to cancel out fear.

What we haven't discussed yet is the Elephant in the room; the thing about COVID-19 that is the underlying cause of panic in the un-believer's eyes, as well as in the believer's. It's what makes us fear becoming infected. After all, if our being infected was no worse an outcome than the getting the common cold then it would be no big deal. We would take cold medicine and be able to carry on our lives in public as normal. The thing that causes fear and panic at the thought of contracting COVID-19 is the possible result: death. Death is the Elephant in the room when we talk about COVID-19 and the steps we need to take to protect ourselves. Death is the thing that we don't like to talk about normally anyway. It's the reason many don't want to go visit people in the hospital. It's the reason many will attend the viewing of a loved one or friend but not the funeral. Death and the sorrow that accompanies it in the lives of the living is the reason many of us avoid and forget about those whose grief remains after the funeral is over. We want to put that behind us and focus instead on what we pray is a long life stretching out before us. But right now our county is facing death in the form of the Pandemic. And here is death presented to us in our Gospel Lesson. Therefore since the LORD is bringing it before us, it's the perfect time for us to take on that Elephant in the room.

Now there is a good reason for our fear of death. Death is not a natural thing. It was never supposed to happen. The LORD created Adam and Eve to live forever. It was only after the Fall when death entered as God's promised consequence of sin. **Genesis 2:17** **but of the**

tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." As soon as they ate, their bodies began the slow march toward death. For us too who inherited that sinful corruption of the heart and mind we are born to begin our own slow march toward death.

Along with this we have a skewed view of our lives. We forget that life is a gift that we neither earned nor deserve. In this the 21st Century with all the medical advances, and knowledge on health and nutrition, we assume that we deserve to live a "full" life: meaning 70, 80, 90 years plus. We fear anything that unfairly cuts this assumed life span short such as cancer, heart attack, or stroke. So we protect ourselves with all the known tools to ward these off. And this is good; we should do this. All this medical knowledge is a gift from God. As we get older, we avoid many of the risk-taking adventures of youth realizing how precious life is; and it is precious, and so we should avoid taking unnecessary risks.

But now here is COVID-19, and it is taking the lives of those who have done all they can to ward off death. Not even the medicine that keeps our blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes, and other problems in check can help us with COVID-19. We shelter in our homes for safety, knowing in the back of our minds that all it takes is one encounter with someone who has it, or to touch something that has come into contact with the virus, after which COVID-19 has won. Now this is not to say that you shouldn't be taking every precaution to prevent infection, because you should. The knowledge that we have about the Virus, and the plan of Shelter in Place are good gifts of wisdom from the LORD. Living as people of faith does not ever mean that we should put God to the test. Jesus gives a great example of what this means in His Temptation in the Wilderness when Satan (**Matthew 4:6-7**) **6 said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you,'and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Reckless things done with the expectation that God will step in and save us despite our stupidity are putting God to the test. In my life I've done these enough times without truly realizing it. I'm not going to purposefully step off the Temple roof and expect Him to catch me.**

For me this means taking all the precautions I can to avoid infection. It means that just in case I am infected I should not take unnecessary risks of infecting those around me. Given all this, it means both for me and for you that COVID-19 might just be the thing that brings your time, or my time on earth to an end. The fear is there in your heart and my heart. And when we don't face it, it causes stress, worry, panic, and eats away at our faith.

So let's take a look at how death is presented in our Gospel Lesson. And even more importantly how Jesus relates to this fear over death. The story opens with Jesus' good friends Mary and Martha sending word that their brother Lazarus is ill. **John 11:3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."** They are referring to Lazarus as the one whom Jesus loved like a brother. But **John 11:5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus** the love referenced here is different. This love that Jesus has for them is far stronger than brotherly love. He loves with the divine love that only comes from God; the love that is an unselfish love that exists even when its not returned. It is a sacrificial love that moves Him to give all that He has for them and for you.

John 11:4 But when Jesus heard it he said, "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." Because Jesus has this great love for them and for His disciples, for the Jews who will be hanging around the tomb observing His miraculous work, and out of love for you and I who read this today, Jesus intentionally acts so that He is not there in time to heal Lazarus before he passes. Imagine how Mary and Martha felt when He didn't come right away. Sending a message to Him they would've known where He was. If He had left immediately and hurried, they know that Lazarus would still have been alive when He got there. They blame Lazarus passing on Jesus absence. That is because they are not privy to the mind of God which has declared Lazarus must pass away so that God the Son may be glorified by bringing him back to life. Lazarus has died before his time, before the allotted days and years they feel he deserved. They are now left alone in a culture that did not provide the best for women on their own. They have much to fear concerning his death.

Likewise we see the Disciples voicing their fear over death. **John 11:7-8** ⁷ **Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."** ⁸ **The disciples said to him, "Rabbi,**

the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" 'Jesus, don't you remember that when we left Jerusalem and came here it was because they were ready to stone you to death? We're safe here. But Bethany is only a 1 ¾ miles from Jerusalem itself. You said Lazarus is sleeping. That means he's resting and getting better. We should just stay here.'

Jesus responds to their fear of a death that they can't see coming through words of faith. **John 11:9-10**⁹ Jesus answered, "**Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.**" Jesus is the light of the world sent into the world to be light by the Father. He has work He must do and now is the time for doing it. Just before this lesson, Jesus was in the Temple being questioned by the Jews. They demanded He tell them if He was the Christ When He did, they picked up rocks to stone Him to death. But the Father didn't allow that to happen. Not because Jesus didn't come to die, He did. But the time according to the Father's will was not yet. Neither will this trip to Bethany be the time. But afterwards, the time of His departure will come. It will come according to the plan and will of the Father, but not until He says so. This was true in Jesus' life, the life of His disciples, and in our life too.

Jesus must go to Bethany. He must give the Gospel Witness to Mary, Martha, His disciples, the gathered Jews and to all those He loves with His divine love including you and to me too. **John 11:21-26**²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "**Your brother will rise again.**" ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "**I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?**" Jesus is the life and the Resurrection. This is the truth that defeated death in Lazarus life. Out of His great love for all, so that we might know who He is and not fear death, He brought Lazarus back to life. Brought him back from the peace of being in the presence of God, back to earth. A place where, as the result of this miracle, the Jews would

plot not just to kill Jesus, but Lazarus too in order to get rid of the evidence that supported Jesus being the Christ. Jesus raised Lazarus for all He calls to faith, including you and I. So that we might believe.

So that you and I might know for certain that Jesus will one day call us out of the tomb He has given us His Spirit to dwell in our hearts and minds. He points us to the Gospel which proclaims the sacrificial love of Jesus being the reason He suffered and died on the cross. That in that unselfish act Jesus has defeated the thing that brought death into the world to begin with: sin. He took our place and our punishment as sinners and gives to us what He earned in our place: life with the Spirit now, and eternal life to come.

Romans 8:10-11 ¹⁰ **But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.** ¹¹ **If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.** Because of the consequence of sin death will overcome our mortal bodies. But with the Holy Spirit living in us through Baptism we are given life now, spiritual life. We need not live in fear of death, nor any death causing agent such as COVID-19. The Spirit of Christ gives to us life now and points us toward a much better future.

As we contemplate our inevitable end, as well as that of those we love, Jesus words to Martha should be placed before our eyes too. **John 11:25** Just as Jesus said to her, He is also saying to you right now: **"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?** Your temporal death is a needed thing. This world that we live in has its own end coming. If you and I were to live eternally on it our end would be its end, which is to be destroyed by fire. Your death and my death lead to a resurrection far better than Lazarus resurrection on our Gospel Lesson. The same God who was able to put flesh on dried bones in our Old Testament Lesson will put flesh, and muscle back on your disintegrated bones that lie in the earth. Your physical body will be recreated and made new, better than before. And the same God who blew the breath of life into those resurrected bodies in our Old Testament Lesson will do so again with you and me on the

Last Day. He will blow the breath of life that is your spirit and mine, that spirit that makes us who we are back into our new and improved resurrected bodies, where it will dwell forever. To never die again.

The gift of Christ that He gives to us through His Spirit in the Gospel is the ability for us to say, and hold fast as the absolute words of truth Martha's confession in **John 11:27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."** That faith makes us good enough to live with Christ now under His protection and look forward to eternal life to come.

So how should we go forward with our lives under the Shelter at Home order as Christians? You should obey it. You should not venture out unless its absolutely necessary. If you are in the special risk category because of age or other health issues you should let others make runs to the store for you. To venture out recklessly is to jump off the roof of the Temple expecting the angels will catch you. Jesus firmly tells us that's wrong. But as we go about living in obedience to God's Will, which is to love Him and love others more than ourselves, we can do so in confidence. We seek to obey Him by worshiping Him through whatever means we can. We seek to help and love those around us through whatever means we can without needlessly risking their health or ours. And when we fail, when we miss opportunities, we repent, knowing that our God is loving and forgiving God who came to earth to cover our missed opportunities, to cover our sins.

As His Church you and I are here serving Him until that time He declares our mission is over. Then He will call us home. That day is one you and I cannot avoid. And truthfully you and I should never want to. It's the door to eternal life. When the Elephant in the room makes us uncomfortable, when it threatens to steal your joy, your hope, your faith, you and I need to turn to Jesus words that He is declaring to us today. **John 11:25 "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?** We can only answer yes by faith. And Jesus came and gave His life so that His gift of faith would be yours and mine. And all that comes with faith too. Our life lived with Him now; He who is

greater than any virus. And when this life is over, our lives lived together forever in eternity. May this faith rule in your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.