

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 2, 2017

John 11:17-27,38-45 (EHV) – ¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. ¹⁹Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them concerning their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary was sitting in the house. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha replied, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the Last Day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies. ²⁶And whoever lives and believes in me will never perish. Do you believe this?” ²⁷“Yes, Lord,” she told him. “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” ³⁸Jesus was deeply moved again as he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹“Take away the stone,” he said. Martha, the dead man’s sister, told him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, because it has been four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³After he said this, he shouted with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The man who had died came out with his feet and his hands bound with strips of linen and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus told them, “Loose him and let him go.” ⁴⁵Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him.

Introduction

Are any of you uncomfortable around graveyards? I don’t mean because you think they’re haunted or anything like that. But would any of you have a hard time walking through a cemetery even on a bright, sunny day? How about funerals? When a friend or family member dies, do you sometimes look for an excuse to *NOT* go to the funeral? Why is that?

The answer’s kinda simple. Some people are uncomfortable around graveyards and funerals because they serve as reminders of our own mortality. When you see the tombstones or the casket suspended over the hole in the ground, death stares you right in the face. You realize that the next one could very well be your own.

Theme: Life Journeys to the Tomb.

Someone once referred to the span of a person’s life as a journey “from womb to tomb.” Death is like a bookend to a person’s years of life. Or is it? This morning, instead of saying that life is a journey to the tomb, we’re going to study our Gospel Lesson under the theme: **LIFE JOURNEYS TO THE TOMB**. Why? **To comfort the grieving. To call forth the dead.**

Part I: ...to comfort the grieving.

Our text just sort of jumps right into the middle of the story. Jesus had been spending time on the east side of the Jordan River and had received word from Mary and Martha that his good friend Lazarus was sick. Actually, this whole family was very tight with Jesus, wasn’t it? Remember how he’d spent time with them and how intently Mary sat at Jesus’ feet while Martha prepared that big ol’ meal. Mary was also the one who’d anointed his feet with the expensive perfume. Strangely enough, Jesus waited two whole days before he started heading towards Bethany, where the three siblings made their home.

“When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them concerning their brother.”

Their funeral customs weren't all that different from our own. Funerals were held more for the benefit of the survivors rather than for the deceased. Friends and family would come to a wake to mourn the loss and to grieve with loved ones. They'd offer their words of comfort and their shoulders to lean on.

Have you ever been in a situation where you almost resented a person who was trying to console you – where you just wanted to be left alone because they couldn't possibly know what you were going through? Or maybe you've been on the other end of things, trying to come up with the right words to say to comfort someone, but not wanting to make the situation any worse than it already was. I'm sure the sisters appreciated those who came to visit them from Jerusalem, but it just wasn't the same as having their dear friend Jesus there to comfort them in their grief. He always seemed to know just what to say.

“When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him... [She] 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.’”

Martha's brokenhearted condition is the result of the ugliness that sin has brought into our world. We're all too familiar with it. Many of us have asked the same question of God: “Why didn't he do something to prevent this?” And that's not necessarily unbelief talking. It's simply the aching cry of grief. Yet Martha still expresses hope. She doesn't seem to be asking for the raising of her brother, but isn't this just the way a believer talks to God when words fail? “I don't even know what to ask for, God, but I know that you'll do what's right.” Martha shows faith in spite of her grief.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha replied, ‘I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the Last Day.’”

Knowing exactly what he was about to do, Jesus makes a clear and comforting promise. He'll raise Martha's dead brother back to life. When she assumed he was talking about Judgment Day, she again showed her faith, but that's not what Jesus was referring to. What he says next is the most amazing promise of all. **“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never perish.”**

So often grief blurs our vision to the point that we can't see what's standing right in front of our eyes. Life itself had journeyed to the tomb of Lazarus to comfort the sisters in their grief. How many times don't we pass right over the comfort we have in Jesus without giving it a second thought. Sometimes, in our grief, his promises seem intangible. They aren't things we can hold in our hands. They seem almost too good to be true. Our faulty human reason keeps shoving the finality of death in our faces. Death challenges Jesus' promises.

Jesus also challenges us to believe them. **“‘Do you believe this?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ she told him, ‘I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.’”**

Jesus is resurrection itself. He's the very epitome of life. He's the promised Anointed One of God – God's very Son – who was to come into the world to save it. He holds out the free promise of eternal life to those who put their trust in him. There's no better comfort for us in our grief than that Jesus is resurrection and life.

When you're grieving – whether it's over the loss of a loved one or when your life seems like it couldn't get any lower – remember that Jesus is the Christ and that he journeys to the tomb to offer you his unparalleled comfort. Death isn't a bookend, but a door through which we pass into eternal life.

Transition

Not only does Jesus journey to the tomb to comfort the grieving, he also journeys to the tomb to call forth the dead.

Part II: ...to call forth the dead.

Our text skips over the part of the story where Jesus truly shows his humanity. When he saw Mary and those with her weeping, he was deeply moved and tears came to his own eyes. His grief continued as they reached the place.

“Jesus was deeply moved again as he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ‘Take away the stone,’ he said. Martha, the dead man’s sister, told him, ‘Lord, by this time there will be an odor, because it has been four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’”

The Greek word used for “being deeply moved” has the basic sense of “snorting” or “showing indignation.” You might say that Jesus was sick and tired of death and how it tears up the whole human race. Martha’s words about the body’s condition are kind of puzzling in view of what she confessed before. We often focus on the discomfort or embarrassment rather than on Jesus’ promise. But Jesus reminded her that he’d come to call forth to life that which was dead.

“So they took away the stone. Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’ After he said this, he shouted with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The man who had died came out with his feet and his hands bound with strips of linen and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus told them, ‘Loose him and let him go.’”

Death is going to touch all of our lives someday. A few weeks ago, we heard from Romans how death is what we earn for ourselves because of our sins. Adam brought it into the world, but none of us can claim an exemption. We all stand guilty before God, deserving of physical death and also of eternal death, because of our wickedness. Jesus also journeyed to the tomb – not to the tomb of Lazarus, but to his own tomb – and it didn’t happen all that long after the incident in our text. He deserved it no less than we do because he was completely covered with the filth of our sins. Death wrapped him in its powerful arms and slowly squeezed the life out of him. His cold, dead body was placed into a dark tomb.

But Jesus is Resurrection and Life. The chains of death weren’t near strong enough to hold him. He shattered them and took back his life and stepped boldly – and bodily – from the dark tomb into the glorious light of day. No one had to say, “Jesus, come out.” Just as he gave up his life of his own accord, he took it up again. No one had to remove the grave clothes, but he left them neatly folded on the stone where his body was laid.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus was **“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.”** Through his Word, he’s already called us from spiritual death to spiritual life. But that’s not all. The day will come when he calls our bodies physically out of our graves, reunites them with our souls, and takes us to heaven where we’ll live forever. Lazarus was temporarily raised. He eventually returned to the tomb. When Jesus calls us from death to life on the Last Day, we’ll never experience death again. Because we have that rock-solid promise of Jesus, we need not fear death. How glorious it will be as he calls us forth to see the glory of God with our own two physical eyes!

Conclusion

We march on towards Holy Week with a new perspective, don’t we? Jesus, THE Resurrection and THE Life, continues his journey toward the tomb. It’s not a tomb of defeat, but of victory. Because his tomb is empty, he brings comfort to us in our grief and he calls us from death to life – new life right now in his kingdom and eternal life forever in heaven. Amen.