

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 10, 2011

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

John 11:17-27, 38-45

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. 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, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. (NIV)

When Manhattan criminal defense attorney John Jacobs died in 2005, his wife Marion buried him with his cell phone fully charged. In fact, these years later she says she continues to pay the monthly bill and still leaves him frequent voice mails. Marion actually went so far as to have John's cell number engraved on his headstone, so that visitors stopping by the grave site can give him a ring and leave a message. He, of course, never gets the messages and the phone battery--not to mention the operator--stopped working years ago. This whole thing might sound kind of silly, but Marion is hardly alone in this. Over the last six or seven years being buried with one's cell phone has become almost commonplace. It's perhaps one more way people try to cope with death.

Dear friends, there has to be something better, anything that offers more comfort and provides more hope than this, doesn't there? Thankfully there is a much better way to cope with death - really there is only one way that provides true comfort and hope. The only good way to face death is with Jesus. Turning to this heart-touching account from God's Word this morning, it is my prayer for us all that: **When death comes we turn to Jesus. Jesus cares. Jesus conquers.**

All of us, sooner or later, deal with the sobering truth and reality of death. Because of sin, death is the common plague that affects us all. In this account we witness death's harsh reality again. Mary and Martha, along with friends, relatives, and neighbors, are mourning the death of their brother Lazarus. He got sick and just like that their brother was snatched away from them. They are filled with grief and sorrow. We, too, know that type of pain. We, too, know that type of loss.

During times like this do we ever ask the question: where is Jesus? Where is God when I need Him the most? How could He allow this to happen? Couldn't He have done something? Why? Does Jesus really care about my suffering, about my pain, about my loss? Perhaps these thoughts were going through the minds of these two sisters, for when Jesus arrives Martha goes out to meet Jesus saying: "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" Mary, falling at Jesus' feet, also said: "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" Did they question why Jesus was not there when they needed Him most, question if Jesus really cared? These questions were certainly evident in the statement of some who came out to the grave to pay their respects. Some said: "**Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?**"

Do we ever ask the same type of questions? Where is Jesus when we suffer pain, when we suffer loss? Why, when Jesus gets news that Lazarus is very sick, does He wait two more days before He even begins His journey to Bethany? Does Jesus care? Dear friends, this account removes every single doubt. Jesus cares. The evidence is overwhelming. That Jesus cares about people's pain and loss could not be any clearer. First, is the fact that Jesus goes to Bethany on His way to Jerusalem. His disciples tried to convince Jesus to avoid going to the city at all costs, for last time Jesus was there the Jews tried to stone Him. But we read that "**Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.**" Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus is dead and that they are going.

When Jesus arrives, He speaks words of comfort to Martha. He gives remarkable promises. And Jesus weeps. Yes, the Son of God shows once again that He is fully human. Jesus is moved to tears when He sees Mary weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping. We are told that Jesus is deeply moved and troubled. What a comfort this truth is as the writer of Hebrews states: "**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.**" (4) When Jesus goes out to the grave of His friend, Jesus once again is deeply moved. Jesus cares. Jesus also cares about our loss, about our pain, about our suffering. So, like Mary and Martha, we too turn to our Savior.

When death comes, either when we expect it or unexpectedly, there is no better place to turn than to Jesus. Jesus truly cares. But when it comes to death, you and I know the wonderful truth that Jesus does much more than just care. Jesus conquers! This couldn't be any more evident than it is in this Gospel lesson today, could it? Jesus makes a bold clear statement to Martha, a promise we need to hold onto tightly and never let go. "**I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.**" This is exactly what Jesus means for us. He is the resurrection. He is the life. In Jesus, death is defeated. Its'

sting is gone. When death comes for all who trust in Jesus, they simply pass from this life into the glories of eternal life. We will never die.

Jesus doesn't just say these words to us, but, in His grace, He now also proves them by His power. Lazarus was dead and of that there was no doubt. He was in the tomb for four days, and when Jesus asks for it to be opened they are concerned about the dead body having a bad odor. But Jesus orders the stone to be removed and prays that those around might hear and see what He was about to do and put their faith in Him. Then with a loud voice Jesus gives the command with just three words: "**Lazarus, come out!**" And death is defeated. Jesus proves His power - even over death. When Lazarus walks out of the tomb in front of them all, Jesus tells them to take off his grave clothes and let him go. Just like that Mary and Martha, friends and family are reunited with their loved one. They had Lazarus back from the dead. Jesus conquers death.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, come back again in two weeks from today and see how Jesus has done the same thing for you and me and all people. Join us in the biggest celebration of the church year - Easter. Celebrate your victory. Celebrate how your death has been defeated. Witness the Resurrection and the Life in all His glory. Come to church the Friday before and see Jesus bravely go to the city to take away the sting of death for us. Watch how Jesus willingly faced the most dreadful death of all on a cross to make a complete and full payment for our sin. See Jesus save you from death. Come Good Friday and Easter for the greatest examples of how Jesus cares and Jesus conquers.

When death comes for us, or our loved ones, please understand I'm not saying there will never be tears, or pain, or sorrow, or a sense of loss. But Jesus has given us something far better than burying cell phones with our loved ones to cope with death. Because Jesus lives, we also will live. And Jesus truly lives - to wipe away our tears - to silence all our fears. Jesus is always here for us and Jesus cares.

So we do not grieve like those who have no hope because we believe that Jesus died and rose again. We believe that Jesus will one day return and wake up all those who have fallen asleep in Him. One day, at our graves, Jesus will say the words: "*Come out.*" Then we, and all believers, will be reunited with all our family, with our parents, and brothers, and sisters, and grandparents, and friends, and everyone who in death turns to Jesus and His promise: "***I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.***" In dealing with death how we answer Jesus' question, "***Do you believe this?***" will make all the difference in the world. May our God always give us the faith to answer with Martha "***Yes, Lord, ...I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.***" Then we, too, will experience the eternal joy and truth that, because of Jesus, death has been swallowed up in victory. Amen.