

John 11:1-45: 1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 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."

5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 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?" 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." 11 After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." 12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 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?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. 34 And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away

the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” 43 When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” 44 The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.

“Death Loses Its Sting”

THE TEXT:

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior.

The text for today’s message is the Gospel reading from St. John, the 11th chapter.

INTRODUCTION

What is death? Well, there’s physical death—the death of the body. Medically, it’s not always easy to tell when death occurs. Is it when the heart stops beating or when the brain stops functioning—or is it when the body begins to decay? Theologically, death occurs when the soul departs from the body.

Death isn’t natural. God didn’t create the human body to die. Death is a result of the Fall into sin—it’s the result of being separated from God, who is life and gives life.

Death is never happy or good—it’s not our friend, as the ancient Greeks thought, from whom we get the term euthanasia—“good death.”

Death is never beneficial. Killing unborn children or the elderly won’t solve humanity’s problems—it only makes them worse as life is cheapened.

Life is God’s gift, but death is sin’s curse. Death steals our loved ones and robs us of our hopes and dreams.

Death is the one enemy none of us can escape. No matter how rich or poor, educated or uneducated, healthy or unhealthy—death comes for us all. One guy told me he reads the obituaries everyday to make sure he’s still looking at the grass from the right side. Death is the one thing in this life that knows no prejudices. But,

BECAUSE JESUS CHRIST IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE, FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIM, DEATH HAS LOST ITS STING BECAUSE A LIFE LIVED IN CHRIST DOESN’T END IN DEATH.

I. There is a physical death.

In our Gospel reading today, 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.” We don’t often think about it, but Jesus was at a funeral when He spoke those words, a funeral where the bitter sting of death was felt by two of His closest friends, Mary and Martha. Their brother, Lazarus, had died of an illness Jesus could have cured—but He delayed coming to them and now Lazarus is dead—and buried. Jesus was too late; now, all that was left was the mourning.

As far as we know, human beings are the only creatures on earth that know they’re going to die. We’re conscious that death will one day knock at our doors and this affects us in the here and now. So, We plan FOR death—we buy life insurance, make long-term funeral arrangements, and draw up wills. We also plan AGAINST death—the older we get, the more interested we become in routine medical testing, in eating healthy and getting enough exercise—and in avoiding situations that could do us harm. We do these things in the hope that we can keep death at bay.

The poet Dylan Thomas wrote in his poem “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” that man should do more than try to avoid death, man should strive against death—“Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” But no matter what we do, death finds us and profoundly affects those we leave behind in the land of the living.

In our Gospel reading, we see how the death of Lazarus deeply affected Mary and Martha, and their community. John reports: “many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.”

Even Jesus was affected by the death of Lazarus and the sorrow of his family and friends. John writes: “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept.” Jesus’ own grief was a demonstration of His true humanity—His true compassion for all of us when we lose someone we love.

II. Death would become a reality for Jesus.

Jesus knew death. Death was a constant companion everywhere He went, as people brought to Him the sick and the dying. His life was threatened many times. And He prepared His disciples for His death. Jesus knew He was born to die. And in the end—after Jesus’ friends abandoned Him—death remained.

Death is our constant companion, too. We all started dying the moment we were born. Our days are numbered, the Psalmist writes (Ps. 90:10): “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.” We’re all dying because we’re all sinners and receiving the just wage of sin.

Jesus faced death—not because He was a sinner—but because of our sin. God’s wrath against sin had to be satisfied. But this is the grace and mercy of God—that He poured His wrath

against our sin into the cup that Jesus drank to the last drop. All of our sins of thought, word, and deed were put on Jesus on the cross and there they were crucified with Him so that in Him we would have the forgiveness of sins.

That's why I wear a crucifix—because this is how and where God accomplished our redemption.

In one of the most Gospel-rich passages of Holy Scripture, the prophet Isaiah announces, “But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed.” (53:5).

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, something happens to death—St. Paul says that it loses its sting! Wasps, bees and hornets would be a lot less frightening if they had no sting. The sting of death is sin—but in the forgiveness of sins won by Christ's death—God plucks out the sting of death.

After Lazarus died, Jesus said to His disciples: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” How about that for death losing its sting! Jesus changes the believer's physical death into “sleep,” and to sleep means one day Jesus will wake you up to live with Him forever.

III. Christ is the resurrection and the life.

But for Martha, death was pretty much final until the Day of Judgment—that's when she thought God would do something about death: “I know that [my brother] will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Because Jesus had not yet died and risen again, Martha and the disciples hadn't yet made the connection between Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. To prove that He is the resurrection and the life, Jesus backed up His words with a miracle—He went to the tomb of Lazarus where his body had been laying for four days.

Now, if anyone ever wondered if Lazarus was really dead, the stench alone was proof. I've been to morgues to collect tissue for scientific research and the smell is something I'll never forget. Yet, a rotting corpse was no match for the power of the Son of God. Lazarus was awakened from the sleep of death by the Word of Christ—by the very power of God body and soul were again united and Lazarus came forth from his tomb! Everyone there saw that Jesus is “the resurrection and the life.”

John tells us that many came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah because of this great miracle. But many others did not. This miracle galvanized the enemies of Jesus into action—lifelong enemies became allies as Pharisee and Sadducee conspired to kill Jesus. The High Priest prophesied that one man must die for the people, namely Jesus. Eventually, their conspiracy was successful and one Man did die for the people.

But God used their wickedness for His good purpose—and He even used death to defeat death! Jesus died to win forgiveness—and after three days, the One who raised Lazarus was Himself raised from the dead, thus defeating death and the grave.

And did you know that you've already been raised from the dead? St. Paul says in our Epistle reading from Romans: “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.” In Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit—the Lord and Giver of life—raised you up from the deadness of sin and gave you new life in Christ. Because of the grace of God given in this life-giving Sacrament, whoever believes in Jesus, even though He dies, yet shall he live—and whoever lives and believes in Him will never die because death has lost its sting! The one who lives and dies in Christ lives forever!

CONCLUSION:

One of the brilliant things that the editors of Lutheran Service Book did was to put the words of Jesus from today's Gospel reading as an antiphon to the Nunc Dimittis—the Words of St. Simeon. Long before He died, Bill Kochman asked that the Nunc Dimittis be used at his funeral and it was if the editors of LSB heard him: Right there in the Funeral Service (LSB page 281)...

In His resurrection, Jesus has plucked the sting[er] from death—death no longer gets the last word—Jesus does when you hear Him say on the Last Day—“Come Forth!” Come forth to the Grand Reunion that awaits all who believe that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life.

In His Name. Amen.