

Sermon Title: *"Death Stinks"*

March 29th, 2020 – 5th Sunday in Lent

Text: John 11:1-53



Theme: Yes, death stinks, but thanks to Jesus, death doesn't have the final say

What's in it for me?

Sermon Text:

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

How is everyone doing so far? Well, here we are as we continue our march with Jesus to the Cross. Can you believe it that next week is Palm Sunday? We started out on Ash Wednesday with a sermon series about, "What happens when I die?" It followed 1st Corinthians 15, but here in today's Gospel message, it comes full circle.

The story is a familiar one to most of us, Jesus and His disciples are up in Galilee when word reaches Jesus, that His friends Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus, is deathly ill. We don't know what illness it is, but in 1st Century Judea, there are a plethora of options. Pneumonia, Cholera, Malaria, and even The Black Death, kill thousands. Jesus intentionally delays until Lazarus dies and uses the usual euphemisms that we use when we don't want to say someone has died. Not too surprising, the Disciples are slow on the uptick and they don't get it, so Jesus has to bluntly tell them that Lazarus is dead. So, Jesus and the Disciples make what at the time was about a three-day journey to Bethany. Bethany is about two miles from Jerusalem and also close to Bethlehem. While not explicit, Scripture seems to suggest that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are wealthy as myrrh and frankincense were worth as much as gold.

By the time Jesus and Co. arrive, Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. Middle Eastern burial customs are a little different than ours. The dead are buried on the day they die as bodies decompose very quickly in that environment, so there is no waiting for friends and family to get together for a "celebration of life." There's no viewing of the body or open casket. The body is wrapped in a burial cloth and put in a tomb. If wealthy enough, the body is coated in myrrh and perfume. As touching a corpse renders the person ritually unclean, women were often given this task. After this was complete, friends and family would gather to help comfort the grieving family.

The death of the last adult male relative would leave the household in a great bind. If the family was wealthy enough, widows may be able to live off their savings, but this was quite rare. More often,

women were forced to try to find a new husband, turn to prostitution, or begging in order to survive. There were few career paths for women in 1st century Judea.

As Jesus had already had compassion on the woman from Nain and raised her son, Jesus first seems a little off. While Nain was the next town over from Nazareth, there is no indication from Scripture that Jesus (in His Humanity) knew the family, but in this case, Jesus is personal friends with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. His slow response at their invitation seems out of place, and even callous. Martha lets him have it, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”* (John 11:21). But then she continues, *“But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you,”* (John 11:22). Martha’s next comments indicated which Jewish camp she and her family are in. Judaism is divided into three main groups at this time, the Pharisees (who generally run the Synagogues and do believe in an afterlife), the Sadducees (who run the Temple and do not believe in an afterlife), and the Essenes (the guys who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls. They also believe in an afterlife but are living in a self-enclosed desert community near Qumran). Martha states her belief that Lazarus will be raised on the Last Day; is strong evidence she believes in an afterlife. Jesus then asserts His Divine nature, stating His one of His famous “I AM” statements, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, although he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die,”* (John 11:24-25). This is only something that God can truly say, so Jesus, besides invoking the Old Testament name of God (Yahweh), is making an overt claim to be Yahweh.

Jesus is about to prove His claim, but first He takes time to grieve with Mary and Martha. Notice what He is doing here. Jesus acknowledges Mary and Martha’s pain and grieves with them. Jesus actually cries, which makes me puzzle when we sing, “Away in a Manger.” Who ever got the idea that Jesus didn’t cry? It’s out of character. Jesus wept here and for Jerusalem.

Jesus doesn’t leave it at that, however. He tells them to take Him to Lazarus’ tomb, and orders that the stone enclosing the tomb be removed. This is unusual at this time as decomposition was not complete. (After a year or two, after the decomposition process was complete the bones would be retrieved and placed in an ossuary [bone box]). Jesus is warned about the odor. Undeterred, Jesus prays to His Father. In His prayer to His Father, Jesus reveals why Lazarus died, that Lazarus’ resurrection would be proof of Jesus’ divinity and that those there to witness it would see the undeniable proof of it. In other words, Lazarus’ death and resurrection served a greater purpose. When the stone was removed, there was no doubt that Lazarus was dead. The odor of death is distinctive and was as recognizable as the odor of marijuana is today. Marijuana has a distinctive odor that smells like nothing else and you can usually smell it before you see it. When you smell it, you know exactly what it is. So

was the smell of a dead, decomposing body to 1st Century Judea. When Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb, and then he does, there is no doubt that he was dead, but now is alive.

This miracle gets back to Jerusalem to the High Priest and the Sanhedrin within hours and is one of the most overt demonstrations that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. It also signals to them, “I’m coming for you, and I’m coming during Passover.” During Passover, Jerusalem’s population swelled by about three times its normal capacity and Caiaphas walked a tightrope trying to maintain the status quo, keeping Rome at bay, while also trying to stave off a self-destructive Jewish rebellion against Rome. That would eventually happen in 68 AD (The same year Paul and Peter are executed).

Until this point, Jesus was considered by the Sanhedrin and the High Priest just to be a crazy Rabbi way out in Galilee. He wasn’t much of a threat to their power, until now. That’s why from this point on, Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin plot to put Jesus to death. Jesus is now on a clear, trajectory heading towards the Cross. Lazarus’ newly restored life was also in danger, since he was the proof of Jesus’ divinity.

So, what does this story mean for us? While the death of a male relative doesn’t necessarily have the same bleak economics that was true of Mary and Martha’s time, death in our time, male or female still stinks. There are currently a lot of people grieving in this state. As of Wednesday night, according to the Washington State Department of Health, there have been 3723 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 175 deaths. What makes matters worse is our limited ability to be with our loved ones or comfort them in their grief.

I know a lot of Christians, myself, included, who have tried to comfort a grieving friend or family member with the phrase, “You’ll see him/her again in Heaven.” Does this sound familiar? A friend who recently lost his wife, recently confessed that comments like this are less than helpful. While this comment is certainly true, Lazarus is proof of that, like Mary and Martha, he doesn’t want to wait until the Last Day to see her again. The text also reveals that we have a God that grieves with us. Jesus never wanted us to die. He never wanted us to experience the pain of separation. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve messed up. They brought sin into the world. Sin is separation from God. The pain we experience at the death of a loved one is a direct result of the sin we brought into the world. Our stinking sin creates an odor far worse than that of a decomposing corpse. Why does he or she have to die? Because he or

she is a sinner, and so are we. As Paul writes, *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord,”* (Romans 6:23).

See, Jesus weeps with us, but thankfully, death doesn't have the final say. Just as Lazarus' death and resurrection set the stage for Jesus to go to the Cross and fix what we screwed up, Jesus reminds us that even though we die, we will have eternal life as long as we believe in Him.

The same can be true of suffering. Why do we have to suffer? Why did he/she have to die? Why can't we meet? Why is this happening to me? The answer is the same. *“So the Glory of God can be revealed.”* And it will be revealed. We have a God that suffers with us and comes along side us to comfort us through the pain, know it serves a greater purpose. How is God working through you? Think about it, problems that plagued us just a few weeks ago seem so distant and so unimportant. Through our suffering, we are reminded of what is really important and we long for the fellowship we used to take for granted. Think of how wonderful it will be to come together as a congregation, school, and community center again. I don't know if it will happen by Easter, but I'm hoping by Pentecost. I'm also hopeful that through online worship, we have been able to reconnect with our shut-ins and have them participate in worship in a way they have not been able to do in quite some time. I hope that continues, even after we get together again physically. This pain, suffering, and separation has a greater purpose, and that purpose is that God's Glory be shown to all people. We don't always accept it or understand it, but remember, God's ways are not always our ways. At the proper time, we will understand. I have certain hope of that.

Speaking of revelations, Jesus' final words to us are also written down by John, *“Surely I am coming soon,”* (Revelation 22:20). There's another “I AM” statement. John's response I, think, is ours as well, *“Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen,”* (Revelation 22:20-21).

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Quotations from Scripture come from:

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