

**Text: John 11:17-27**

**Theme: Life! Promised and Proven**

**Date: April 2, 2017 (Lent 5A)**

In the Name of Christ Jesus, who defeated death, Dear Christian friends,

The site of a cemetery with its grave markers, or the glance of a casket adorned with colorful floral arrangements may not be common occurrences in our every day life. In the rapid flow of our personal or family life we may seldom take pause to think about death and dying – until - someone gets sick, is involved in a serious accident or some other circumstance that threatens life. But no matter how little the topic of death is on our minds day to day, there comes a time for each of us when it is unavoidable. Perhaps someone close to you—a friend, a relative, a neighbor— has died unexpectedly from an accident or disease or developed a life threatening illness. At times like these—times when you were forced to stare death coldly in the face—how did you react? What raced through your minds? What was on your heart? How did you feel?

A tragedy had come into the earthly life of a woman named Martha in our Gospel lesson for today. Martha and her sister Mary lived in a little town near Jerusalem called Bethany. The sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus were good friends of Jesus. The Bible tells us that their dear brother Lazarus had become seriously ill; So serious that Mary and Martha immediately sent for their friend Jesus and asked for his help. Death may have been the last thing on the minds of these sisters in the days before their brother Lazarus got sick. But it soon became very real when they found out about their brother’s illness. Jesus, however, did not come right away. It was not part of God’s plan for Jesus to immediately respond to his friends’ plea although he loved them dearly. And so while Mary and Martha anxiously awaited Jesus’ arrival, the unthinkable happened. Lazarus died. What was only a fear, now became a reality. To an onlooker it might have seemed that Jesus had let his friends down in their time of crisis. But as we listen more closely to the words of Martha, God allows us to witness the heart of faith in action when it counted the most. When it appeared that death had defeated life, Jesus demonstrated his power. Jesus granted life. Today, through the lives of Mary and Martha, Jesus gives us not only his powerful promise of life, but he proved it with his actions.

### **1. The Promise of Life**

#### **Circumstances Concerning Death**

In the words preceding our text we are told that Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus in Jerusalem that his dear friend Lazarus was sick. This action of sending word to Jesus was done in faith. Mary and Martha simply let Jesus know of the need and would leave the rest up to him. They knew Jesus was less than two miles away. They knew it was but a short trip even for those who traveled on foot. When it comes to matters of sickness and illness it is enough for us, with similar hearts of faith, just to bring the matter to Jesus in prayer and leave the rest up to him? It was enough for Mary and Martha. It’s enough for us.

After a short delay, Jesus' arrived in Bethany, the home town of Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. The words of our text tell us that Lazarus had already died and had been buried at the cemetery now for four days. Mary and Martha, being comforted by their friends, were mourning the loss of their brother Lazarus. Undoubtedly thoughts of the cemetery filled their minds; 1-thoughts of sadness and sorrow, 2-loss and loneliness, 3-sin and the separation caused by death. SS-LL-SS

#### **Sin Causes Death**

Thoughts of the cemetery remind us of the reality of our own death. Many people ask, "Why does death have to happen?" God answers, "*The wages of sin is death.*" The Bible says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Paul says "*Death came to all people, because all sinned.*" Because all have sinned, death will come to all people. No one will escape it. It comes every day to young and old alike. It comes suddenly, like a heart attack, with no warning. It comes after a long and painful illness like cancer. Thoughts of our cemeteries remind us that the wages of sin is death just as God said it would be.

Thoughts of the cemetery also become a grim reminder of why Good Friday was so necessary and so good. S-T-I

- It was our sin that caused Jesus to die.
- It was our transgressions that caused his lifeless body to be carried out to the cemetery.
- It was our iniquities that caused the Son of God to be buried in a borrowed grave.

*Returning to our text we see that the action of Jesus delaying his arrival at Bethany was not a loveless action resulting in cold and sullen death. In fact it was just the opposite as he set the stage for the greatest display of love, the promise of life.*

#### **The Promise of Life to Martha**

When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick he told his disciples. "*This sickness will not end in death. No, is it for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.*" As Jesus approached the city of Bethany he first met Martha near the cemetery where the lifeless body of Lazarus lay. There, at the cemetery site, he spoke the promise of life to her. Martha, Jesus said: **YOUR BROTHER WILL RISE AGAIN.** And just in case Martha didn't understand the impact of Jesus' first promise of life he repeats it this way: **I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME WILL LIVE, EVEN THOSE HE DIES; AND WHOEVER LIVES AND BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER DIE.** Martha then in faith responded: **YES LORD, I BELIEVE.**

## The Faith of Martha

Martha's response to Jesus' promise of life expresses faith when doubt and uncertainty were strong temptations. You may recall that Martha's faith didn't always express itself in such a clear manner. Do you remember Jesus' earlier visit to the house of Mary and Martha? It was the time when Mary sat at Jesus' feet clinging to his words while Martha became upset with her sister because she wasn't helping with the meal preparations. Jesus lovingly told Martha that there is only one thing needed and Mary had chosen what is better. Mary was being filled with the words and promises of her Savior. Martha's confession of faith concerning the resurrection of her brother Lazarus would indicate that there had been a change in her heart. No longer was she overly concerned with temporal affairs for it was now clear that spiritual matters took a higher priority in her life. Apparently Martha had followed the words and instruction of Jesus and the example of her sister. What a blessing that was for her now as she stood staring at the cemetery where her brother Lazarus lay.

## Resurrection Comfort

Since death is a reality why would anyone want to neglect the words and instruction of Jesus concerning life? He has promised life in the face of death. Jesus says: **WHOEVER BELIEVES IN ME WILL LIVE EVEN THOUGH HE DIES.** Can there be any greater comfort than those words of Jesus? Especially when we know that as a result of sin we will all face a physical death. Jesus also promises us that death is not the end. He says: **WHOEVER LIVES AND BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER DIE.** Can there be a more blessed promise for those who believe in Jesus than knowing that when I close my eyes in the sleep of death I will immediately awaken in the life of heaven? I will leave this world of sin and enter the glory of heaven. There is no promise like this one. Nothing can compare!

## A Different Look

Jesus' promise of the dead still living and the living never dying makes us look at our cemeteries today in a different way.

- Death caused by sin is replaced with life from the Savior.
- Sadness and loss are now tempered with hope, joy and the gain of life in the resurrection from the dead.
- The rapid flight of time and frailty of life are put into the heavenly perspective by the sure promise of life in a heaven that never ends.

## 2. The Proof of Life

*On that day at the cemetery Jesus not only spoke the promise of life but he demonstrated life itself.*

### Jesus Prayed with Confidence, Boldness and Thanksgiving

After having the stone in front of the grave rolled away, Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father. **FATHER, I THANK YOU THAT YOU HAVE HEARD ME. I KNOW 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.** Even Jesus, the Son of God, when facing the reality of death caused by sin, approached his heavenly Father with confidence, boldness and thanksgiving. When we stand in the cemetery of our loved ones and friends our heavenly Father wants us to approach him with that same confidence in his love and power, with that same boldness as his own redeemed children and with that same attitude of thanksgiving for his grace.

### Lazarus' Resurrection – A Preview of Power

After praying, Jesus simply with no dramatics and no delay said: **LAZARUS, COME OUT.** By the power of Jesus' words the once dead man stood up, hands and feet still wrapped in his burial linen cloths, and walked out of the grave. At the cemetery Jesus had demonstrated his power over death itself.

This defeat of death at the cemetery of Lazarus is only a preview of Jesus' defeat of death and hell at his own cemetery. In a few short weeks Jesus would fight the final battle against sin and the death it causes, not only for Lazarus, but for all people. Because of sin he would be arrested, mocked, spit upon, and condemned. His body, wracked with pain and torn by the nails of the cross, would give up its own life in death. But more than that, Jesus would be separated from his heavenly Father in death that would take his soul to the depths of hell for us. Ever more reminding us of what the Bible says: *"The wages of sin is death;"* Jesus' death for our sin.

### Jesus' Resurrection – The Proof of Power

But after only a few short days of his death, the sealed tomb would become opened, the tears of loss and sorrow would become tears of joy and hope, and death would now become life. Jesus' own resurrection from the dead would give proof to what the Bible says, *"The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus."* Jesus had told his disciples **BECAUSE I LIVE, YOU ALSO WILL LIVE** and in his resurrection he becomes living proof and a living promise.

## A Look Beyond

As we relive our Savior's suffering and death during this Lenten Season, we look beyond the mockery, the pain of crucifixion, the agony of hell and see Jesus' resurrection from the dead. As we live our lives in this sinful world, we look beyond our own physical death or that of our loved one and see the resurrection from the grave to a perfect life in heaven. The story of Lazarus getting up and walking out of the grave is a real and accurate picture of the resurrection from the dead. It's God very own picture of life at the cemetery. It's a life God has given to you in Jesus.

## Conclusion

Who doesn't want life? God's promise of life was proclaimed at Lazarus' cemetery. God's proof of life was witnessed at Jesus' cemetery. Those who want life must first stand at Jesus' cemetery and see and believe in his empty tomb. Then and only then will our cemeteries no longer be only a grim reminder of death, but a blessed promise and proof of life with Jesus in heaven. Amen