

**Jesus Comes to a Funeral**  
**John 11:17-27,38-45**

**March 22, 2026 (Lent 5-A)**

**St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom**

*On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now 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. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

*"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is 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 believe, you will 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." (Jn. 11:17-27,38-45 NIV)*

Dear friends in Christ, the Resurrection and the Life:

Since my start as a pastor in 1990 (yes, it's been that long), I've witnessed a number of changes in society that affect ministry. One of them is funeral practices. When I started out as a pastor, when a person died, a funeral was conducted three, maybe four or five days later. There would be a casket, and the committal would take place immediately after the funeral. Nowadays, a funeral can take place many days, even weeks after the person's death. Most of the funerals I've conducted over the last 15 years have not had a casket, but an urn with the deceased's cremated remains in them. During the raging of COVID six years ago, many funerals were postponed, and that trend continued even after Covid was no longer a scourge.

But the main thing about funerals has not changed. It's been true for Christian funerals ever since the funeral of Lazarus in today's gospel reading. We treasure this truth: **Jesus Comes to a Funeral.**

In Jesus' day 2,000 years ago, funeral customs were quite a bit different than ours. A Jewish burial took place on the same day, or at least within 24 hours, of the person's death. You see, the Jews did not embalm the body as the Egyptians did, nor did they cremate the body, which was associated with Greek paganism in that day. (By the way, cremation has lost its stigma as being a practice of the heathen many years ago, so if you have it in your will to get cremated, you can do so in good conscience.) Spices and perfumes were anointed on the dead body which was then wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth over the face, as we see with Lazarus. Mourners would come to console the grieving family for seven days.

We see how many Jews came to Martha and Mary to comfort them when their brother Lazarus died. Four days after the burial, the crowds still kept coming. Bethany was less than two miles from

Jerusalem, so many were able to come and go. We get the impression also that this family was well-known and well-liked.

Jesus was good friends with the family, too. He had gotten word of Lazarus' severe illness, but delayed coming. By the time he got there, Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb for four days. Martha was the first to go out to see Jesus. We can hear the grief in her words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Martha had seen Jesus heal so many people; she was sad that Jesus hadn't made it. "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Martha still put her hope in Jesus and her God that something good would still come from this.

Jesus consoled Martha: "Your brother will rise again." It is with those words that our Lord consoles the bereaved today. At a funeral, it's all right, even good, to shed tears. "We mourn with those who mourn," as Paul wrote to the Romans (12:15). Family and friends of the person who's passed away feel a great loss at the time of death. Even Jesus, after talking with Mary and seeing the tears in her eyes, mourned. We're told, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35), the shortest verse of the Bible. At the same time, we "do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope," as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (1Th. 4:13). Martha knew, too, that death is not the end; there will be a resurrection on the Last Day. When Jesus comes to a funeral, he comes to do more than console the bereaved. He comes to command the dead.

As Jesus approached Lazarus' tomb, he was "deeply moved." The phrase actually means that Jesus was angry; he was shaking with anger over death. The Son of God, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, had created mankind in his own image, holy. They were meant to live forever. But then man and woman fell into sin, and death, like an unwelcome intruder, entered the world and stayed. And so we too must die, because we are born sinful and also commit sins.

But Jesus would not accept the status quo. This, in fact, is why the Son of God came to earth: To change the grim fact of death. This is what he told Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." What an amazing promise! Don't ignore the first two words, "I am"; this was Jesus' way of identifying himself as the same Lord God of the Old Testament who spoke to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM." Jesus is I AM, the LORD! And that means he is the resurrection, he is the life. When Jesus comes to a funeral, we don't have to wonder and wish that our loved one can live again; we know it, because Jesus has power over death, he will raise the dead. And the one who believes in him, even though death comes, yet he or she will live forever.

Jesus not only promised it to Martha; he demonstrated it for all present at Lazarus' funeral. At the cave where Lazarus was buried there was a stone covering the entrance. Jesus commanded: "Take away the stone." They did so. Jesus prayed. And then another command, this one in the direction of the dead man. "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man heard and obeyed! Grave clothes and all, dead Lazarus rose up and walked out of the tomb, alive!

Jesus commanded Lazarus with a loud voice for the sake of the crowd, as he told his Father, "that they may believe that you sent me." The miracle did its effect: "Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him." Martha also had expressed her faith in Jesus even before the miracle: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come to the world." It was a beautiful confession of faith, trusting that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah, the one to come to save the world, the one and only Son of God!

When Jesus comes to funerals today, it's by his Word. The words that Jesus spoke to Martha, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," are read at many a funeral and graveside. By his Word Jesus commands the dead: "You who die in Christ are not conquered by the grave; you will not suffer hell; I will raise you on the Last Day and you will join me in heaven." We know it because Jesus himself, who suffered death, rose from the grave. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification," St. Paul wrote (Ro. 4:25). Let us always comfort one another with those words. Amen.