

March 29, 2020

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Text: John 11:1-45

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus were friends and disciples of Jesus. When Lazarus fell ill, the sisters sent messengers to find Jesus and ask Him to come heal their brother. It is easy to infer that this happened quickly, but there is no indication of how long Lazarus was sick, not how long it took the messenger to find Jesus. This could have been a span of days or weeks. Jesus eventually received the message, but He didn't hurry off. He waited two more days before leaving. He told His disciples, **"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"** (v.4). The Twelve must have thought that Jesus' foreknowledge told Him that Lazarus wouldn't die, but it was the opposite. Jesus knew Lazarus would die, but his death would serve a greater purpose: To display the power of the Son of God over death and to reinforce the ancient teaching of the resurrection of the all flesh. After He determined the time was right, Jesus told them, **"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."**

Days went by. Lazarus' body was prepared in the traditional way, cleaned, anointed with herbs and oils, wrapped in linen strips and then placed into a tomb. When word arrived that Jesus was on the way to Bethany, Martha rushed out to meet Him. She was upset, and perhaps a little resentful, because she said to Jesus **"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."** (v.21) She spoke from pain, not a lack of faith. She still had great faith, for she said to Jesus, **"even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."** (v.22) Even with Lazarus dead in the tomb four days, she hoped against all reason and experience that Jesus could do something.

Pay attention to this next part: **"Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day"** (v.23-24). Martha believed in the resurrection of the body, which we as Christians confess in all three of the Ecumenical Creeds. It is sad that many Christians go their whole lives and know nothing of this Scriptural teaching, which actually predates the incarnation of our Lord. That's what happens when you ignore the Creeds: You reject the very things the apostles and Church Fathers taught. The resurrection has always been part of God's plan and hence our faith.

In our reading from Ezekiel 37 we heard about the vision God gave to Ezekiel 600 years before the birth of Jesus, which gave rise to the spiritual song from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, "Dem Bones":

*Ankle bone connected to the heel bone  
Heel bone connected to the foot bone  
Foot bone connected to the toe bone  
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

*Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.  
Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.  
Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.  
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

You've probably heard secularized versions of that song used to teach children anatomy, but the original is straight from Ezekiel 37. Modern higher critics will tell you that Ezekiel 37 is not about the actual resurrection of flesh, but of course, if you don't believe in prophecies and miracles like most modern Biblical scholars, you have to explain away every prophecy and miracle. Most Jews in Jesus' times understood this to mean the physical resurrection of the dead on the last day. This was the core of the disagreement between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: The Sadducees were like higher critics, rejecting certain parts of Scripture out of hand. In addition to the resurrection they also denied the immortality of the soul and the existence of angels.

The promise of the resurrection is found in many places in the Old Testament, such as in the book of the prophet Daniel, chapter 12: **"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."** (v.2) So it is not surprising that most Jews of the time believed in it. And it is also not surprising that our Lord taught it Himself. After all, He gave the prophecies to Ezekiel and Daniel and the other prophets. So when Martha met Jesus outside Bethany, her response was not of unbelief, but one of faith: **"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."**

When we confessed the Nicene Creed earlier, we were saying the same thing as Martha. We *"look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."* What world is that? The new heaven and the new earth, which God will remake according to His promise to renew creation. This is what St. Paul wrote about in Romans chapter 8; **"creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God... in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption...And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved."** (Romans 8:19-24)

Not just the saving of our souls, but the redemption of our created bodies. Physical existence is not bad nor is it an accident. God created all matter, including daffodils, giraffes and all of us, and He declared that it was good. But it has all been infected with sin. We struggle against the effects of this sin daily, including the effects of old age, disease and death. He will correct this universal infection in a colossal reboot on the last day when He makes the world anew. All the dead will be raised and judged: Those who believe in the Living God and His Christ will be raised to eternal life. Those who have rejected Him and His promises, to everlasting condemnation.

This is not just a minor point for theological nerds. How we understand our fleshly bodies affects how we treat the disabled, the unborn, the sick and our dead and what we expect when our Lord comes again. Do we expect to be floating around as incorporeal ghosts, playing harps on clouds like in the old cartoons, or do we believe God when He said creation was good and can be again? Do we seek to perfect humanity using genetic engineering, aiming for the

new world without God? Do we chase the post-human fantasy that we must evolve ourselves out of these organic bodies in order to cheat death, becoming cyborgs or minds downloaded into computers? Or do we believe that only God can undo what sin has done? Do we believe that God is bigger than our limited intellect and can recreate the world in the same way He created it the first time, by His all-powerful Word?

Jesus, being fully God and fully man, felt the loss of a dear friend in the same way we do. He wept for Lazarus, for Martha and Mary, their friends and family, He wept for them all. Glorious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. But the grief of Jesus is like the grief of all who believe in Him: Temporary and tempered with the sure knowledge of God's gracious will. Jesus told them to remove the stone from the tomb and He cried, "**Lazarus, come out.**" And Lazarus, dead in the tomb four days, who had already started to stink of rot and decay, was renewed in an instant and raised to life. He came stumbling out, still wrapped in the linen strips and everyone was so shocked they stood there until Jesus prompted them to take the linens off of him. The dead lived again. Jesus was not just a preacher and teacher, He was the very Son of God, the Messiah long awaited. He has power over life and death, the power over creation itself.

We have no fear of death because Christ overcame death for us. When we breathe our last breath, we will sleep the sleep of the saints, joining the blessed dead in heaven temporarily, confident that Jesus will raise us again to life eternal. In your Baptism you died with Christ and were raised with Christ and this promise is now yours. Through God's washing of rebirth, not only have all your sins been forgiven, but you have been given the promise of immortality. Like Lazarus, our slumber will end with the voice of Jesus calling us out of our tombs to join Him physically in the new world. We will live with Jesus for eternity, along with all the saints who went before us. And there will never be another day with fear, or want, or weeping, because the victory of Jesus will be complete.

In His holy name. Amen.

Rev. Schopp