

# LIFE OUT OF DEATH

John 11:1-53

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series A)

March 26, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel of John*, chapter 11, verses 1 through 53. I'll warn you, it's a fairly long reading, so I invite you to stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 11, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." <sup>4</sup> 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."

<sup>5</sup> Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. <sup>7</sup> Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." <sup>8</sup> The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." <sup>11</sup> After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." <sup>12</sup> The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." <sup>13</sup> Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. <sup>14</sup> Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, <sup>15</sup> and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." <sup>16</sup> So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

<sup>17</sup> Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup> Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, <sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. <sup>20</sup> So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.

<sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup> She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

<sup>28</sup> When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." <sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> And he said, “**Where have you laid him?**” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”<sup>35</sup> Jesus wept.<sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”<sup>37</sup> But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.<sup>39</sup> 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.”<sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, “**Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?**”<sup>41</sup> 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.**”<sup>43</sup> When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “**Lazarus, come out.**”<sup>44</sup> 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.**”

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him,<sup>46</sup> but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.<sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.<sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”<sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all.<sup>50</sup> Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.”<sup>51</sup> He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation,<sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.<sup>53</sup> So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*  
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Dear Graham,

Your Jesus brings life out of death. Today, in your Baptism, Jesus has brought you to life. You were buried with Jesus and raised with him, so that, through his death and resurrection, you have been raised to new life.

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We saw this power of Jesus in the Gospel lesson today. We also heard it in the other lessons. This is the work of God. He calls life out of death.

In the Old Testament lesson (Ezek. 37:1-14), the Lord commanded Ezekiel to prophecy over a valley of dry bones. He did, and flesh came upon the bones. Then he prophesied to the wind, and the wind came and blew breath into the bodies, and they came to life. The power of life is in the Word of God to call life out of death.

Then, in the epistle lesson, St. Paul says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the Law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:1-2). Again, “The Law of the Spirit of life” is God’s Word. He

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speaks a new law to us. But it's not like the old law, which says to us, "Thou shalt," and, "Thou shalt not." That law condemns us, because we have not done, spoken, or thought rightly. Therefore, it brings death to us and is called "the law of sin and death." But the new law declares to us that God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. God condemned all sin in the flesh of Jesus (8:3). Jesus died with that sin and condemnation. Therefore, the new law declares that we are not condemned, but forgiven, so it breathes new life into our weary souls.

And in this gospel lesson, Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead merely by speaking to him, "**Lazarus, come out**" (John 11:43). Jesus calls life out of death.

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Now this might seem like an odd text for Lent. Lent is something of a somber season. It's not necessarily sad, but we spend more time contemplating our sinful and fallen condition. We acknowledge that we are doomed to die. And we observe Jesus as he journeys toward the cross. So all this talk about resurrection and life seems like it might fit better in Easter. But it actually fits very well in Lent, because this is part of Jesus' journey to the cross.

The account is bookended by references to how the leaders of the Jews wanted to kill Jesus. Just recently, they had attempted to kill him in Jerusalem, so Jesus withdrew from there (10:31, 39-40). And when Jesus talks about going back, his disciples caution against it (11:7-8). And they're right to be afraid. At the end of the chapter, the leaders of the Jews renew and intensify their plot to kill Jesus. So this fits into Lent very well, because this is a significant event in Jesus' journey toward the cross and his death. It also signals the purpose for Jesus' death. He brings life out of death.

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The leaders of the Jews are getting progressively madder at Jesus. Last week we heard about how Jesus healed a blind man on the Sabbath, and they considered this to be a violation of the Sabbath command (9:16). It wasn't, but there's something else going on in their hearts. Now Jesus calls a dead man out of a tomb in front of many witnesses, and it inspires the Pharisees and chief priests to get organized. The more good Jesus does, the madder they get. The more his following grows, the more they fear him. The more he reveals himself to be the Son of God, the more they seek to kill him. It's very strange.

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Jesus arrives in Bethany four days late, or so it seems. When he heard the news of Lazarus' illness, he waited two days before going, so even if he had gone right away, Lazarus still would have been dead for two days. So it seems that Lazarus probably died right after Mary and Martha sent word for Jesus.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Martha, the sister of the dead man, comes out to Jesus. She has a complaint: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:21). And this is okay. Jesus does not chastise her for complaining. The thing about complaints is that they are also a confession of faith. When children complain to their parents, it's because they believe their parents can actually do something about the problem. And Martha clearly believes that Jesus can do something, or at least, that he could have done something about it before her brother died.

We might be bashful about complaining to God. It feels sinful, and maybe it is, because everything we do is tainted by sin. But do not worry about that. Worry about other sins, but do not worry about complaining to God, because it is a confession of faith. When you complain to him, you're complaining to the right person. You've found the person who can actually do something about it.

So Jesus does not chastise Martha for complaining. He assures her, “Your brother will rise again” (11:23).

Martha thought Jesus was talking about the resurrection on the Last Day (11:24). And he was. Jesus continues to comfort her by saying, “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.” (11:25-26)

These are among the most comforting words in all of Scripture. They are a promise to Martha, as well as to everyone who depends on Jesus, that death is not the end. Even though you die, and even though your loved ones who believe in Jesus die, death is not the end.

The dead will rise in the resurrection on the Last Day. Our eternal hope as Christians is not a body-less, floaty existence in a ghost-like heaven. It is a real, physical life in God’s New Creation, but without all the pain and suffering that is embedded in this material world. And Martha believed this promise of God for herself and for her brother.

This is what Jesus was talking about when he said, “Your brother will rise again.” But in the case of Lazarus, there was also a little bit more. There was a double meaning to Jesus’ words, because Jesus was going to give a sign. He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead that very day. It was a sign to prove that Jesus *is* the Resurrection and the Life, and he *will* raise the dead on the Last Day.

So when Jesus finally gets to the tomb, along with a bit of a crowd, he compels them to remove the stone. He gets some resistance, because Lazarus had been dead for four days (11:39-41). I like the way the King James Version phrases it. Martha says, “Lord, by this time he stinketh” (KJV). But Jesus insists. Then he says a prayer (11:41-42) and cries out, “Lazarus, come out” (11:43). And the formerly dead man walked out of the tomb (11:44). Jesus raised him from the dead with nothing but his words. He called life out of death.

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The aftermath is interesting. Not surprisingly, many of the Jews who saw this believed in Jesus (11:45). That’s the logical thing to do when you see someone raise people from the dead. But it’s hard to keep something like this a secret. And that was the problem, not so much for Jesus, but for the religious leaders.

Some of the eyewitnesses reported the miracle to the Pharisees (11:46), and they were concerned. So they got together with the chief priests to decide what to do about this Jesus problem (11:47). There certainly seems to be some jealousy at work. But the big problem, at least in their minds, was political.

Israel was not a free nation. They were allowed to live and worship with relative freedom, but the Roman Empire was really in control. And as long as everything was peaceful, Rome didn’t have a problem with letting the Jews practice Judaism. But the dangerous thing about Judaism was the expectation of a Messiah, that is, the Christ. The Jews believed that the Christ would be more of a political figure who he would lead a revolution to restore Israel’s independence. And, from time to time, false christs would appear and lead a little rebellion. But it was in the best interest, both of the Romans and the leaders of the Jews, to keep these things at bay.

But the signs Jesus does are unheard of. If they let him go on like this, all the people would believe in him. So far Jesus hasn’t shown any political aspirations. But his followers want him to, and if he does, they won’t be able to handle it. Rome would have to come with a massive army, and there would be an all-out war. That’s what the leaders of the Jews are afraid of, and

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fear leads to hate. This, from their perspective, is why Jesus had to die. He did too many awesome things, and now the rulers are scared.

So Caiaphas, the high priest, says, “It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish” (11:49-50). To Caiaphas, the solution was really simple: just kill him. He was simply being pragmatic. In order to keep the peace, Jesus must die. And Caiaphas really doesn’t care if he’s innocent or guilty. His eyes are blinded by fear. And his plan is absolutely evil.

But despite how evil his words sound, they are God’s good and gracious will. In fact, these are not even Caiaphas’ words. John tells us they are God’s words spoken through him (11:51). And Caiaphas has no idea what they actually mean. The irony is so thick we would need a chainsaw to cut it.

That year Caiaphas “prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (11:52). This murderous high priest uttered a true and gracious prophecy from God about Jesus. But he had no idea what his words actually meant. He and the other leaders believed they were doing God’s work by arresting Jesus, handing him over to the Romans, and begging them to crucify him. They believed this was God’s will in order to save his people. And it was! But they had no idea how. What they meant for evil, God meant for good.

They were looking for a political salvation. Jesus’ death was supposed to prevent a war. But Jesus’ death was part of a bigger war. God was working out eternal salvation. Jesus was going to war against sin, death, and the devil. That is the salvation Jesus’ death accomplished.

That’s why Caiaphas prophesied what he did. Jesus would die for the *sins* of the nation, and not only for their sins, but for the whole world. His death would gather together God’s children from every nation and tribe and language around the world. The Son of God was going to war against sin, death, and the devil. He was going to secure that resurrection that he promised to Martha and to all who believe in him.

God brings life out of Jesus’ death. His death is the ultimate source of life. His death is the source of our eternal life. It might seem ironic that death is the source of life, but that’s how God works. He brings life out of death. Jesus swallowed up death by his death, because that is where he atoned for the sins of the world. Here’s how it works: Death is the consequence of sin. So when sin is atoned for, death loses its grip. The result of this is resurrection and life. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, because death had lost its grip on him. And he will call us out of death, because he has loosened death’s grip on us. Where sin is forgiven, death has no hold.

God brings life out of death. Jesus called Lazarus out of death and back to life. By his own death, Jesus destroyed the power of death, along with sin and the devil. Now Jesus calls you out of death. As you have been baptized into Jesus’ crucifixion, you share the benefits of his death. Death could not hold him, and it cannot hold you or any of God’s believing children. When Jesus appears again, he will call us out of death and into perfect, eternal life. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.