

Sermon: John 11:17-27
March 9, 2008

Three of our congregation members had a death in the family this past week. Three more of our members are sick to the point where they are facing an imminent departure from this world. Death's to both young and old show us that we are not guaranteed any number of days in this world. All of us live on the edge of death. I know, it is kind of a gruesome introduction to the sermon, but I think it shows very clearly that this Scripture lesson today from John chapter 11 is relevant to us all. It is said that the only certain things in the world are death and taxes. However taxes is open for debate, death is not. We have a great example of how Jesus helps us with death in the text today. For it is Jesus alone who gives life; A healthy faith-life and a forever life.

We meet up with the Mary and Martha family again. You may remember that once when Jesus visited this family, Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened while Martha made all the meal preparations. As we meet them a second time it is obvious that the mood is quite different. In fact this is a family which is grieving because their brother Lazarus has died. Many Jews, friends probably, came from nearby Jerusalem to visit with and help this grieving family. While I am sure Martha was grateful for the support that they received during this difficult time, there was someone else that she was waiting for, someone that her faith longed for: Jesus. The friends were comforting, but it was her healthy faith-life that helped her through this difficult time and the object of her faith was on his way into town.

It is a broken-hearted Martha that meets Jesus on his way. Though her faith in Jesus was strong, her words show here great grief. "'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'" This thought weighed heavily on Martha's heart. Perhaps the sisters had talked between themselves about their disappointment that Jesus wasn't there. Remember that Jesus received word that Lazarus was sick, but did not come right away.

We can relate to Martha, can't we? The same question haunts the recesses of our minds and our hearts in times of trouble. We plead to God for relief, but none seems to come. We beg for help in solving some problem, but don't get an answer. People we love get sick and die, we pray for their healing, but death overtakes them. Death causes us to doubt God's control, God's power, God's love, his willingness to help us in our greatest times of need. These thoughts were at the heart of Martha's question, and they come to us too.

Even though Martha got after Jesus for not coming sooner, her faith in him still shines through. She says, "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Even in her doubts she takes hold of Christ. She had seen Jesus do some amazing things. He had prayed to God and God answered him immediately. She had seen Jesus heal people who were terribly sick. She had even seen Jesus raise people from the dead. Perhaps this is what she had in mind for Jesus on this day.

Jesus now had an opportunity to strengthen the faith-life that Martha had. “ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ 24 Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’ 25 Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.’” Through all of her grief, Jesus wants Martha to fall back on the things that she knows to be true, not the doubts that her grieving heart are throwing her way. Jesus reassures her that her brother will rise again. This gives Martha an opportunity to confess what she knows to be true. Lazarus will rise again on the last day. What a tremendous confession of faith. This is an example of Martha’s faith-life shining.

You have heard me use that word, “faith-life.” What I mean by that is Christians live life differently than those who have no faith. A person with no faith could not answer that statement of Jesus like Martha did. They may be able to say, “They’re in a better place.” But they don’t know where that place is and in their heart they are not sure. They have no hope of a resurrection reunion. They see that person as gone forever. Not the Christian, not you and I. We can answer in the same way Martha did. I know that my loved one will rise again on the last day.

The reason that we can say that is not because we believe it. It is not because we hope for it. We can say that because Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” We confess along with Martha that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world. He is the foundation of our life and the reason that we have a faith-life. Jesus said in John 10, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Jesus is talking about life right now, not eternal life. To live in Christ and to have him live in us brings purpose and meaning to our lives. We live, knowing that we have a gracious and a merciful God. We live, knowing that our guilt is taken away by Christ. We live, knowing that there is something better to come.

It is true, Jesus has come to give us a faith-life: a life with purpose, direction, and hope. But he also came to give us a forever life. Jesus said to Martha, “He who lives and believes in me will never die.” These could be difficult words for someone like Martha who has just lost a loved one. Martha responded to those words in faith. Jesus asked her if she believed what he just said and Martha responded in faith, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.” In other words she simply said, “Lord, if you say that this is true, then it is true.”

We know how the story ends with Lazarus. Jesus shows us all that we can trust his words. He called Lazarus from the grave and brought him back to life. It was as if to say, “See, this is what it will be like on the last day when all are called from their graves.” Jesus doesn’t raise everyone who dies from the grave like he did Lazarus, at least not yet. But this demonstration of Jesus’ power gives us hope and comfort when our loved ones pass away.

It is easy to lose hope when we see the remains of our loved ones lowered into the grave. It seems so final. But it is not, there is more beyond. It is not something that we understand, but we have Jesus’ promise on that. Just like Martha, when Jesus promises

that our loved ones will never die, we respond, “If you say so Lord, then it is so.” What is existence like for the soul, that did not die, but went to be with God? Luther once said, “It is true, souls hear, think, see after death, but how they do it we do not understand...If we think in terms of this life, we are fools.”

Pastor Mark Lenz tells the story in his book on the eleventh chapter of John, “For hundreds of years, the people of Western Europe looked out over the western sea we call the Atlantic Ocean and wondered if there was anything beyond. Some claimed that if you sailed west, you would sail off the end of the world, that there was nothing out there at all. In fact, inscribed on the coat of arms of the nation of Spain was its national motto, *Ne Plus Ultra*, which means, ‘There is nothing beyond.’ Then one day Christopher Columbus and his crew sailed west. Months later they returned to announce that there was land beyond the sea which was rich beyond their wildest dreams. It was a glorious paradise. It all led to the king of Spain changing the motto of his land to what it reads today, *Plus Ultra*, which means, ‘There is more beyond.’

Jesus Christ rose from the grave himself to show us that there is more beyond. There is a glorious paradise that is beyond our imagination. Jesus was just the beginning of a great resurrection that is going to occur on the last day. For now we enjoy our faith-life, life that is filled with purpose, direction, and hope. We rejoice when our loved ones are called to this great paradise, and we look forward to our forever life with Christ, and with them.