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Believers Can Face Death with Confidence

The prospect of death terrorizes those without faith in Christ. They peer into a future that is unknown and unsettled. Christians believe that death is the entry to heaven, but even for Christians, death can be challenging and intimidating. In today's Gospel, Jesus brings support and certainty to Christians living with the reality of death. In his words and actions Jesus provided a reason for confidence and hope and he offers the same to us today.

Sermon John 11:17-45

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." Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Introduction – My mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease in the early 1990s. My dad took care of her at home as long as he could, but eventually he had to admit her at a care facility. He sat at her side every day even when she didn't know him anymore. She died in 2000. About six weeks later he called and asked if I would take him to the cemetery so he could see the gravestone. So we got there and he got out of the car and started walking. I let him go alone. He stood there and I could see that he was crying. I knew why. It wasn't because he wondered if she was in heaven; he knew she was. It wasn't because he wanted her back; he didn't want to see her suffer anymore. He was crying for only one reason: he missed her. After 59 years he missed her. We stayed

for a while and then we walked back to the car. On the way back he looked at me with a sad smile and said, **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.** He was quoting St. Paul.

In Eden there was no such thing as death. After Eden there was no such thing as life, at least not life with God. Sin cut the cord between God and people and there was no reconnecting the cord once it was cut. Life without God is death, eternal death, it-lasts-forever death, hell. That's the death Eve's offspring came to crush. Jesus accomplished that crushing on the cross and he reconnected people to God. **The wages of sin is death, the Bible says, but the gift of God is eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Jesus changed our standing with God, but we still live with sin. We're reconnected to God but we are not disconnected from sin. We endure the trouble our own sins produce and we endure the trouble of other people's sins. Christians have life with God, but some Christians eat too much or drink too much or worry too much or work too much; their bodies wear out and they die—actually they die even if they don't do anything too much. Some Christians fall asleep at the wheel and they die. Some Christians die because other people fall asleep at the wheel. Christians didn't create Covid, but Christians caught Covid and they died. For all of us and for all the people we *knew* and all the people *know* death is as certain as taxes. St. Paul was right and so was my dad when they both said, **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.**

1. The Gospel for today takes us to a funeral in the little town of Bethany a couple of miles from Jerusalem. The man who died was Lazarus, the brother of two sisters, Mary and Martha. We know Mary and Martha; Jesus often stayed at their home when he went to Jerusalem and they were absolutely devoted to him. Lazarus was just as dedicated.

So it happened that Lazarus got sick. **The sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."** But Jesus delayed and by the time he got to Bethany Lazarus had been dead for four days. Of course, the house was filled with mourners, but **when Martha heard Jesus was coming, she left the mourners and went out to meet him.** With all her heart Martha believed what Jesus had taught her. She confessed it clearly, **I know my brother will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.** She was convinced that Jesus was the offspring who would crush Satan and eternal death. She said, **I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.**

But Martha still wanted her brother back. What she really wanted was a miracle. **"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."** She believed in Jesus with all her heart and soul, but what she believed wasn't quite enough to take away the pain. Mary wasn't there at first. We get the impression she had collapsed in grief at the house. But **when Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."** Here was the woman who sat at Jesus feet listening to the one thing needful that would not be taken away from her, but she wanted her brother back, too.

Faith doesn't take the sadness out of death. Death opens the door to heaven but it also closes the door to people and tasks we love. With death we get to see Jesus, but after death we don't see spouses and grandchildren and life-long friends anymore. Death raises questions we hadn't thought about before: Who'll handle the finances now, who'll make the meals now, who'll listen when I need to talk? And even if death is a relief for someone we love, we still miss them. "She was ready to go," we say, "but it would be nice to have her back."

Jesus understands the hurt that comes with death. When he was dying, he provided for his grief-stricken mother. When he met a mother at the gates of Nain who was following the casket of her only son, **his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."** Jesus sees the sadness that death brings to people and their sadness

saddens him. In Bethany, too. **When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"**

My father cried at my mother's grave because he missed her. No lack of faith there, no thought of her return. The work on the cross is finished. Satan is crushed, hell is defeated, sins are forgiven. One enemy remains. **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.** And Jesus is the destroyer.

2. So you're standing in line at the funeral home or the church and you're thinking what to do and what to say when you get up there. Maybe a hug, maybe "I'm so sorry." Here's what Jesus said to Martha: **I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.**

We can probably identify with the grief Jesus' followers felt on Good Friday afternoon. The women were devastated by the ugliness of death. The apostles ran from it; they didn't have the courage or the commitment to watch. We can imagine the manly tears Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea shed as they laid the broken body on a stone slab in the tomb. They all went home and hardly slept. But at some point in the darkness, Jesus opened his eyes and became alive. He had to die to save us but he didn't stay dead. He shook off the humiliation he endured for 33 years. He folded the grave clothes they had wrapped him in. He went down to hell with a victory banner in his hand and laughed at the forces of hell. And as the sun rose he began appearing to those who loved him. And this was his message: My death freed you from certain death in hell and my resurrection assures you of your certain resurrection to life. Death could not hold Jesus in the tomb and now death cannot hold us in a grave or an urn. Someday I am going to die. Some mortician will lay me in a coffin and some grave digger will lower me in my plot, but I will rise again. And the same thing will happen to you. **Because Jesus lives we also we live.** And when we rise on that last day, that last enemy will be destroyed once and for all.

How do we know? Listen. The tomb was **a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," Jesus said. "But, Lord," said Martha, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."** Do you think Jesus cared about decay or decomposition? The one who created the human body could recreate it and reconstruct it. **Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out.** If Jesus did it once for Lazarus, he will do it again for us. **We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.**

Like I said, we walked back to the car. Do you remember the sad smile? He was sad because death was lousy. Death was his enemy on that day and on lots of other days. We know; we get it. **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.** But that smile preached what may have been the best sermon he ever preached. Death is certainly an enemy. It attacks us with the armed forces of sorrow and pain and regret and confusion. But when that trumpet sounds and our bodies rise from death, then the last enemy will be destroyed. Until then you and I can handle death with sadness that's confident, with grief that's comforted, with heartache that's calmed. And we can smile through our tears. Amen.