

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

We're worried these days. What is going to happen in the weeks to come? We join with David in singing, "*How long, O LORD?*" (Psalm 13:1) How long is this going to last? How long will we be confined at home, not earning a living? Or with regard to church, how long will we be restricted in our gathering together? What are we going to do about Holy Week, Pastor? Or Easter?

The fact is: I don't know right now, because it doesn't depend just on me or just on us. It depends on persons and circumstances out of our control. I pray that we will be able to meet on the great Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord and sing our alleluias again, but I don't know.

I don't know—and in many ways, it's that uncertainty that is the hardest. The governor says that religious entities are essential, and that's good. I don't know what he believes, but he says this as governor because, not unlike Karl Marx and his pragmatic "opium of the people" quip, he thinks that churches can calm fears and give temporal hope to people in these troubled times.

And surely that's true as far as it goes. We turn to the psalms in times like these, like Psalm 46—I'm sure you've heard that many times in these latter days. "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,*" (46:1). They give us comfort; they calm our fears. For many churches, that's all they're preaching in these times: "We will endure in this trouble; we will get through it," and so forth, and so on.

We likely will. I don't know that for certain either, for remember, "*kingdoms [do] totter*" (Ps. 46:6); kingdoms rise and fall (Job 12:23). What I do know is that the kingdom of God is an everlasting kingdom (Ps. 145:13), and not even the gates of hell will prevail against the church (Matt. 16:18). And so, may we look to Christ and to one another in His body, the Church, to help during this time.

Now, of course, the texts before us do extend hope to us in this uncertainty, but remember: our Christian hope goes beyond the temporal and extends into eternity. Therefore, what a wonderful Gospel text to contemplate today in the midst of our uncertain times, because there is no lack of certainty in this text, not about Lazarus and not about Jesus! And this certainty gives us hope.

Here we are in the midst of our government, at all costs, trying to preserve life, to stop people from dying, as if we are not all going to die. But the Lord made it clear to Adam in the garden, "*in the day that you eat of [that fruit] you shall surely die*" (Gen. 2:17). They ate, and although they lived 930 more years (Adam did anyway), they died (Gen. 5:5). How sure is that death toll! One could live as long as Methuselah, and yet it will ring for you as it rang for him: "*and he died*" (Gen. 5:27).

St. Paul says it about all the offspring of Adam. *“Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men”* (Rom. 5:12). And so, with certainty, we say, Lazarus in our Gospel text, died; Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, died; Lazarus, Jesus’ friend, died; Lazarus, laid in the tomb for four days, the stench of death upon him, died.

It should not be a surprise to us, all the efforts of the government notwithstanding, that we will also die. This is certain. Such is the curse of the garden sin that we carry. Such is the curse of the sins we ourselves have committed and added to our ledger of debts. Such is the curse that Jesus Himself would endure, having taken our sins upon Himself. Hung from a tree (Gal. 3:13), He would die.

But today, Jesus gives the mourners and us an inkling of what death really is for those who look to Him and believe in Him: it’s as sleep. Jesus said, *“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him”* (John 11:11).

Jesus also instructs all of us what lies ahead for those same people who trust in Him: resurrection and life. *“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”* (1 Cor. 15:55) As Christians, to be sure, we grieve death; there is still a sting in death’s tail. We miss our loved ones who are sleeping in death. But, as Christians, we also know that death is not the end of life, but the gate of life immortal. Thus, we grieve, but not *“as others do who have no hope”* (1 Thess. 4:13), for God did not make us to die, and He did not send His Son Jesus to condemn us to death, but to save us and to give us life.

Therefore, death and decay give way to the Author of life in this account. Though Lazarus stank from death, *“Roll away the stone,”* Jesus ordered. They did as He said. Maybe that’s not surprising; He did exude authority, after all. But then He said, *“Lazarus, come out!”* And Lazarus obeyed—even a dead man heard His voice and obeyed. Lazarus, still bound in linen cloths, got up and walked out of the tomb. Jesus, who healed the sick and multiplied fish and bread, Jesus, who stilled wind and wave and cast out demons, Jesus even has power over death. He is Lord even over death.

And so, this is certain also for us who will die. That *“though [we] die, yet shall [we] live,”* because of Jesus, because He is *“the resurrection and the life.”* And really, Jesus says, death isn’t really death after all, but mere sleeping. That’s why He could say to Martha, *“everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”*

Now Jesus did all this that *“the glory of God”* might be manifested, and *“so that the Son of God may be glorified through it”* (John 11:4). Jesus did this so that the disciples might believe in Him (John 11:15). Jesus said this that Martha might confess her faith: *“Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.”*

Jesus did this “*on account of the people standing around, that they may believe*” in Him and in the Father who sent Him—and they did.

Jesus did this because it was time for Him to be lifted up unto death, and so to draw all people unto Himself (John 12:32). That’s why “*Caiaphas, who was high priest that year,*” prophesied, saying, “*it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.*” But don’t get it wrong: Caiaphas didn’t do it; Jesus did. He was the One laying down His life of His own accord, not that anyone was taking His life from Him (John 10:18).

Thus, also, John explains: “*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*”—the children of God, “*from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*” (Rev. 7:9), children born of God through the blood-tinged waters of Holy Baptism (John 1:13; John 3:5, 1 John 5:6-7), children of God now, to be sure, but children who have so much more to look forward to and with certainty: for “*what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is*” (1 John 3:2).

That is, when the Resurrection and the Life appears again, He who by His death and resurrection won us life, and by His Spirit gave us life, will raise us up from our sleep in death, saying, “Come, you Blessed of my Father, come forth from your graves; come you bones and sinew, flesh and breath, you resurrected ones and ‘*inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*’” (Matt. 25:34). And the righteous will obey, rejoicing in their eternal life.

Saints, we live in a world of uncertainty, but we Christians have certainty, for Christians put not our trust in princes. We take refuge in our crucified and risen Lord (Ps. 118:9), trusting that “*[We] shall not die, but [we] shall live*” (Ps. 118:17), recounting His deeds and hoping for that which is yet to come. And we Lutherans? We especially confess it: “He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true” (Luther, Small Catechism, Third Article).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.