

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

We're used to talking about death in the church. Jesus' death is always foremost on the minds of Christians; His death is always on our lips. Jesus' death is number one in Paul's list of the things of "*first importance*." "*Christ died for our sins*." Regardless, how it's presented ... "*the Son of Man [must] be lifted up*" (John 3:14) ... "*Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed*" (Matt. 16:21) ... "*Christ died for the ungodly*" (Rom. 5:6) ... "*the death he died he died to sin, once for all*" (Rom. 6:10) ... regardless, it is good news on the ears of sinners.

But this talk can easily become a mere abstraction, that is, until we ourselves come face to face with death. Death has a way of getting our attention and focusing our minds. Just ask the families of those Zion saints that we have buried in the last months — Ginny and Willie and Paul yesterday. We feel the loss in church; the families endure the loss the most.

You know that my mother looked to be at death's door recently. We drove to see her in hospital. She had had a bad day when I arrived at her hospital room. My siblings were huddled together in a corner trying to understand hospice and wondering if the time was ripe to have Mother move to hospice care. Mother improved, and so, it was not yet meant to be. But who knows for how long? Death is still crouching nearby, and it can be a bit frightening.

My siblings weren't happy with me, but I asked Mother if she feared dying; she responded, "yes." They thought it was obvious, and the question should have gone unspoken. Surely, fear at the prospect of death is natural, but not speaking about it meant also not speaking about the hope we Christians have in the face of death: hope in Christ, hope in resurrection and life.

Now, Jesus Himself comes face to face with death in our Gospel, not His own, but the death of His dear friend, Lazarus. Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, described Lazarus as "*he whom [Jesus] love[s]*" (John 11:3).

Jesus first hears about Lazarus' illness, but Jesus delays going to see him. Two days later, Jesus told His disciples that it was time to travel to Bethany: "*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep*" (John 11:11), He told the disciples. By that, He meant that Lazarus had died. Jesus traveled to Bethany "*to awaken him*" (John 11:33), that is, raise Lazarus from the dead, and this "*so that the Son of God may be glorified through it*" (John 11:4).

Yet, even with all of this knowledge and power, still Lazarus' death and Mary and Martha's grief affected Jesus greatly. He "*was deeply moved in his spirit and*

*greatly troubled,*” and *“Jesus wept”* (John 11:33, 35). Death stung even the source of life, the light of men (1 Cor. 15:55-56; John 1:4).

You know what happens next. Jesus commands that the stone be taken away from the tomb. He calls out to Lazarus to *“come out,”* and Lazarus, four days dead, comes forth from the tomb, wrapped up in linen strips. It was a glorious sign, demonstrating the power of *“the Christ, the Son of God.”* Jesus has power even over death.

Much like with the healing of the man born blind, the raising of Lazarus is a foretaste of something greater yet, the resurrection of our bodies and the life everlasting. Jesus promises it to us. We heard Jesus promise it to Nicodemus: God *“gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16). He promised it to the Samaritan woman at the well: *“whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life”* (John 4:14). He promised it to the Jews seeking to kill Him: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life”* (John 5:24). He promised it to the crowd that followed Him back to Capernaum, the crowd He miraculously fed: *“this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day”* (John 6:39-40); and a bit later: *“Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day”* (John 6:54). Again, Jesus promised it to the Jews: *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand”* (John 10:27-28). And Jesus promised it to Martha in our Gospel today: *“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.”* Jesus promises it. This sign confirms it and urges us to believe it, as John tells us at the even greater sign of Jesus' resurrection from the dead: *“these [signs] are written [in this book not only] so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, [but also] that by believing you may have life in his name”* (John 20:31).

Jesus' words to Martha were actually a gentle correction of her confession. Martha was a believer. This is clear. She believed in the resurrection of the body: *“I know that [my brother] will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”* But she didn't understand that it was Jesus Himself who would work this resurrection. She believed only that Jesus was God's agent, without the power Himself to give

life. *“I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”* Even after Jesus' great promise, Martha's confession — *“I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God”* — was incomplete. It sounds like Peter's great confession: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matt. 16:16), but it didn't really answer Jesus' question: *“Do you believe this?”* Do you believe that resurrection and life come through my power? That life is in My name?

Clearly, God, the creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, is the giver of life. Paul said it this way: *“I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things”* (1 Tim. 6:13). I know we confess that the Holy Spirit is “the Lord and Giver of life,” but Scripture testifies to each of the persons of the Trinity as a giver of this life. *“[A]s the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will”* (John 5:21); *“the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”* (John 6:33); and *“It is the Spirit who gives life”* (John 6:63).

So, we see today that in Jesus is life — resurrection and life. And we are promised that believing in Him who raised Lazarus from the dead — more than that ... who Himself was lifted up unto death, even the death of a cross, but who conquered death in His own resurrection — we will rise again on the Last Day. Our dry bones will hear the Word of the Lord speak, and bones will come together, life will return to flesh turned to dust, sinew and flesh and skin will cover us again, and breath and life will enter us again, and we will live. *“Though [we] die, yet shall [we] live.”* And the resurrection of judgment and the second death will have no power over us, for believing in Jesus means that our resurrection is a resurrection of life; we will most assuredly not die forever.

This should calm our trembling breath when we pass death's gloomy portal, as we sing in the Easter hymn (LSB490). For believers, death is but the gate of life immortal. And we believers can with confidence sing, as we did yesterday at Paul's funeral, “Lord, let at last Thine angels come, To Abram's bosom bear me home, that I may die unfearing” — unfearing (TLH429)! For at a time known only to God, Christ will reappear, and He will awaken us from our peaceful sleep. We will rise to see the Lord with our own eyes, and we will receive the blessed inheritance prepared for us from the foundation of the earth (Matt. 25:34). God grant to us that we may believe this, that we may have eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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