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Lent 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Resurrection and Life, Now and Forever”
Text: John 11:17-27, 38-53 (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

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

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Both Martha and Mary spoke those words to Jesus. He hadn't come fast enough. They had sent for Him when their brother Lazarus was still sick. For they knew Jesus healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, cleansed lepers, and healed all kinds of other diseases and sicknesses. And they were His close friends. Surely He would come and help. Surely He would come and heal their brother. Surely He would be there for them when they really needed Him.

But Jesus shows up over four days later. He didn't even make it in time for the funeral. Many others had come from Jerusalem and were there to mourn with them, but so far, no Jesus. So when Martha hears that He's close by, that He's almost there, she goes out to meet Him and cries, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Was it faith or accusation? Sadness or anger? Or maybe it was a mixed-up jumble of all those things.

But that question isn't just the question of Martha or Mary, but of many people today. Maybe you. It is spoken in hospital rooms, at accident sites, and in times of tragedy. Lord, if you had been here . . . Lord, why weren't you here for us? Why weren't you here for us when we needed you the most?

Lord, if you had been here that airliner wouldn't have plunged into the ocean.
Lord, if you had been here that mudslide wouldn't have buried my family.
Lord, if you had been here that shooter at Ft. Hood wouldn't have killed my husband.

Lord, if you had been here that accident wouldn't have happened, that fire wouldn't have happened, that tornado wouldn't have happened.
Lord, if you had been here . . . Lord, why weren't you here for us? Why weren't you here for us when we needed you the most?

Well the truth is, He was. True, Jesus was not there that day in Bethany when Lazarus was sick or when He died, and Jesus was not there when Martha and Mary

wanted Him to be there, but to be here for us and to be here for us in our greatest need is why there is a Jesus at all. It is why the Son of God came down from heaven and was made man. To be here for us. To help us. To rescue us from sin and death.

Because sin is the reason why our loved ones get taken from us, and often taken from us before we're ready. It's not God's fault - it's sin's fault. And it's been that way from the beginning, from the very first sin, when Adam lost his son Abel way before he wanted and way before he was ready. And he knew why. It was his fault. And I wonder what regret he felt, just like we often feel regret and after the fact wonder what more we could have done, or what we could have done differently. And so for Adam: if only he hadn't eaten that stupid fruit! Now, one son's dead and one son's a murderer.

And still today: sinful people do sinful things. Sinful urges surge out of us and hurt ourselves and others. Mental illnesses cause people to act in erratic and often unpredictable ways. Diseases infect and assault our bodies. Creation is groaning and writhing in the throes of sin. And these things, the results of sin, bring death. And Jesus doesn't like it any more than you do. At the tomb of Lazarus, He wept. Those tears you cry, He cries them too.

But while we are powerless to do anything about the sin in the world and the death that results from it, there is One who can. And He is there. And so He speaks words of comfort and hope to Martha: Your brother will rise again, He says. Death is not the end of him.

Which Martha knows. Yes Lord, she says. I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. But what Martha doesn't know (yet) is that she isn't going to have to wait until the last day - the last day has, in a sense, in a small way, come to her! And so Jesus says to her: I AM the resurrection and the life. Or in other words, don't look to the Last Day for your hope, look to ME for your hope. The resurrection isn't a thing or a day, but a person. And where that person is, where Jesus is, there is resurrection and there is life. Even in a world buried under sin and death.

And so with Jesus' coming, the end is already breaking into the here and now. The eternal is breaking into time now. Jesus is bringing the blessings of the end already to us here in time.

And so it is when Jesus meets a widow in a funeral procession to bury her only son
- there is resurrection and life.

So it is when a man named Jairus comes to Jesus for his sick - and then dead -
daughter - there is resurrection and life.

So it is at the tomb of Lazarus - there is resurrection and life.

So it is when lepers come, when the sick come and the dying are brought to Him, when He encounters the lame and blind and deaf and great sinners who are so outcast that they feel dead both inside and out - there is resurrection and life. Our heavenly Father sent His only Son to come in mercy and grace and love and undo what sin has done. To give hope, to give faith, to forgive, and to raise the dead.

But not just then!

So it is today when Jesus meets a person at the font - there is resurrection and life. So it is today when Jesus meets a sinner confessing your sin - there is resurrection and life.

So it is today when Jesus preaches in Church and proclaims in the world His Word of life - there is resurrection and life.

So it is today when Jesus encounters those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and for the gifts here in His Supper, in His Body and Blood - there is resurrection and life.

And what that means is that you've been Lazarus-ed! For just as Jesus called forth Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from death by His Word, so He has called and raised you from your sin and death by His Word. Just as dry bones are given skin and breath and life through the Word of the Lord spoken by Ezekiel, so you have breath and life through the Word of the Lord spoken by a man. That you may live and not die. For Jesus is where His Word and Sacraments are, and where Jesus is, there is resurrection and life. The life of the last day brought back in time to you here and now, that you may begin to live a new life already here and now.

And so Jesus continues His catechesis on this, saying: Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Now that last phrase needs a bit of explanation because lots of Christians die. In fact, all Christians die, or will die, unless Jesus comes again first, for all Christians are sinners. But what Jesus actually said there is not "shall never die" (as the translators rendered his words), but actually and quite literally He said: you will in no way, absolutely not, never die forever. Not die forever. That's a bit different than how our translation put it. And what Jesus is telling you there is that while all Christians will die, death is not the end for them. Though you die, yet shall you live. In Christ and connected to Christ by faith, your death here will be for but a moment. It is now, because of Jesus, simply the gate to everlasting life (cf. Psalm 118). Your death, according to what Jesus says, will be just like sleep . . . and when you awaken, it will be with Him, in Paradise.

And that's so because the resurrection and life isn't just who Jesus is, but what He did. Today we entered into Passiontide, with the crosses veiled and even more of the liturgy taken away from us - all signifying that our Lord was taken away from us. And that's what this whole Lenten season is about - the death and resurrection of our Lord. But not just His death and resurrection, but His death and resurrection for you. He dies and rises and lives so that you who sin and die will also rise with Him and live. That like Lazarus, the grave not be able to hold you when Jesus calls you forth to life.

But just like Martha and Mary and Lazarus, you don't have to wait for the Last Day for that freedom, for that life. Remember: the One who is the resurrection and the life has brought that life here to you already, to live now. For He has raised you to life in Baptism, given you His Word of life in Absolution, and fed you with the bread of life in His Supper. The Last Day breaking into your life here and now, in Jesus, that you live a new life. A life no longer locked in regret and shame, no longer filled with sin and captive to death, no longer filled with doubt and captive to fear - but a life of confidence and joy in the victory and forgiveness of Jesus. For His death is the death of your death, and His resurrection the start of your life. A Christ life, a loving life, a forgiveness life.

So what happened to Lazarus that day is a picture of what Jesus had come to do - a foreshadowing of His own resurrection. And it is a picture of what Jesus has done for you. That though you die, though the sin in this world come crashing down on you, though death rear its ugly head in all manner of ways, yet shall you live. For it is not "Lord, if you had been here . . ." The Lord, your Lord, is here for you. The Lamb who goes uncomplaining forth (LSB #438). The One who loves you with a love unknown (LSB #430). The One to whom we raise our penitential cry (LSB #419). And who is for us still today, the resurrection and the life. Here with you now, that you be with Him forever.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen