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Lent 5

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Life Is Now the End of Death”

Text: John 11:1-53; Romans 8:1-11; Ezekiel 37:1-14

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

Dying is just a part of life. You hear that little phrase bandied about a lot these days. From people trying to cope with death.

What an insidious lie of the devil. For nothing could be farther from the truth.

Death is not a part of life. Death is the very *contradiction* of life. It is the absence of life, the end of life, the destruction of life.

Death is just a part of life comes from an evolutionary mindset, that death enables life to progress, to get better, to get stronger, to adapt, to weed out the weak, to overcome. And it is a lie.

Death is not a part of life, it is the result of sin; it is the wages of sin. In the beginning, in the Garden, there was no death, only life. Things had not *evolved* to that point; it is the way God created them to be. Death came only when our first parents decided they *needed* to evolve, to improve themselves, to progress, to get better than God created them to be. As if they could. And so separating themselves from God and His Word of life, they died. And we died.

And with that, death was *still* not a part of life. We will not accept death! But it did become our reality.

And so it was in Bethany. Surely they had seen death before, this family, these siblings, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Maybe a parent, grandparent, or child had died. Surely they knew the grief of death.

But this time was different. This time they had hope - *Jesus!* He was their friend, and He wasn't far away! He healed so many people of so many diseases, surely, He would come and help. So they sent for Him. And Jesus had said, ***This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*** Surely the messenger sent to Jesus had taken this word back to the

family. And how relieved they must have been to hear it.

But something happened. Jesus didn't come and Lazarus did, in fact, die. And Jesus knew it. After a two day delay, He finally decides to go and tells His disciples plainly: **Lazarus has died.** But Jesus, I thought . . . I thought you said this illness would not lead to death. *Why?* In fact, **if you had been here, my brother would not have died.** Both sisters say that.

So what's going on here? Was Jesus just *wrong*? Well, **THIS illness does not lead to death.** Because it is sin that brings death. Real death. Spiritual and everlasting death. As horrible as cancer, ALS, Alzheimers, AIDS, or any other disease can be, the disease of sin is worse. Sin ravages life like nothing else. Maiming life, embittering life. Killing babies in the womb, killing in the name of so-called mercy, killing for amusement, causing people to even kill themselves.

And *that* is the disease Jesus has come to do something about. All His other healings - of fevers, or leprosy, of dropsy, of deafness, blindness, and lameness - all were just signs and pointers to this greater work. Lazarus' illness, whatever it was . . . did it kill him? According to our sight, our knowledge, yes. *But what did Jesus say? **Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.***

Jesus had said something similar before, with a little girl, and they laughed at Him (Matthew 9:24). Turns out it was true. Jesus woke her up. The eyes of the Creator see differently than we do. We think we know so much, and more and more all the time. Science, technology, AI. Maybe we don't know as much as we think. Maybe we should listen to Jesus. He was right with the little girl . . .

And He is right with Lazarus. So He says, **Your brother will rise again.** Martha assumes He means on the Last Day. She believes that. Which is good. But Jesus has something else in mind . . .

Martha then calls her sister Mary. *And did you notice what she said? **The Teacher is here.*** Not Jesus, not Master, not Lord - **the Teacher.** At the end of this story, Caiaphas didn't know the truth of what he said. Maybe Martha didn't either. But she is spot on. Jesus is about to teach them something about life and death. And it is this: While both sisters say, **Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,** the truth is that their brother will not die precisely because Jesus is there! It is why He was there in human flesh and blood. This is why Jesus came - not just for Lazarus, but for all people. To do battle against sin, death, and the devil, *and win.* To win the battle of life and death.

Where have you laid him? Not buried him or entombed him, **laid him.** Like a baby

in a crib. He might as well have said, *where is his bed?* It's time to get up.

So Jesus tells them to open the door to his bedroom. **Take away the stone.** And He calls to Lazarus, and just as in the beginning, His Word does what it says. *Let there be light*, and there was light (Genesis 1). **Lazarus, come out!** And Lazarus comes out. And there is life, and joy, and faith.

But this is not the main act. That is coming very soon, as is our remembrance of it. When it would be Jesus Himself sealed in a tomb, and Jesus Himself breaking open that tomb. Jesus dying the death that is the wages of sin, the wages of all of our sin. And then vanquishing it! So that St. Paul could so confidently say, **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** No condemnation, no spiritual and everlasting death. There is only life for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Which doesn't mean that you and I aren't going to die. We will. The wages of sin is still death, and you and me, we're sinners through and through. Born with sin, committing sins by thoughts, words, deeds, and desires, committing sins by what we do and fail to do. But in Christ Jesus, baptized into Him and His life and His victory over death and the grave, our death and been transformed into sleep. And **though we die, yet shall we live**, and awaken at His call in Paradise again. The Paradise thrown away by our first parents, now restored by Jesus.

But we're not there yet. Though Jesus has won the victory, which we will celebrate in two weeks now, for now, we're like Ezekiel - we look around and all we see are dry, dead bones. *Lots of 'em!* In all different stages of death and decay. And we wonder: **Can these bones live?**

We do. We struggle with this, just as Martha and Mary did. **Lord, if you had been here . . .** We wonder that, too. Lord, why *weren't* you here - why *aren't* you here, when I need you! Why are you dragging your feet? Why aren't you helping? Why are you too late? And not just with death, but lots of things in life. Things that are ravaging us, killing us.

Well, whose to say He's *not* here? Maybe He is, just not how we think or expect. Or maybe if He delays, it is on purpose, like He did with Lazarus - in order to show us, teach us, something more, something greater. But it's been four days, four weeks, four months, four years. It's too late! . . . *Is it?* Maybe things are not as they seem to us. Maybe there's more going on than we know. But this we know: *Jesus will not leave you or forsake you* (Hebrews 13:5). He's not going to leave you to sin, death, or the devil. He came to rescue you from them. And He does. And He is. And He won't stop. And a few days or a few years are nothing to Him for whom *a thousand years are like a day, and a day as a thousand years* (2 Peter 3:8). It's still tough for us, and so *by faith*

we say with Martha and all the faithful: ***Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.*** Who has come into the world, for us and for our salvation. And is coming again. All to rescue and to save. *Lord, I believe; help my unbelief* (Mark 9:24).

For as John told us, what Caiaphas said was true: ***It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.*** But actually, he's not quite right. *It is better that one man die for the world, than that the world perish.* So Jesus did. Caiaphas thought he was saving the nation by putting Jesus to death. He was really just helping Jesus save it. And the world. For what men intend for evil, God uses for good. Over and over we see the truth of that in Scripture, and still it is true today, for you and me. We may not know how or why, but we believe.

And believing, *we repent.* Repent for thinking we know better than God, more than God. Repent for doubting the love of our Father. Repent for thinking that our way is better than His way, and so doing what we want rather than what He wants. Repent for trying to save ourselves.

We repent so that we can hear what He wants to say to us more than anything else: *I forgive you.* Words that still today do what they say. Just as the words *I baptize you* and *this is My Body, this is My Blood.* Like Jesus' words spoken to Lazarus, these are words that give us life. We who reek of sin. We who are bound by our sins and trapped in death. But when Jesus says *I forgive you*, that is Jesus saying to you, ***come out!*** Come out of your sin, come out of your fear, come out of the life that you are living that leads to death. Come out of *that* tomb, and walk in the way that leads to life. Come, follow Me.

This Lenten season, and this Passiontide now upon us, we follow Him to the cross. And we see Him there in all His glory, in all His love. **For He is there for you.** They wanted to put Him to death, and they did. But they couldn't keep Him there. He rose to life, for life. For the life of the world.

Because death is not a part of life. It is the enemy. *The last enemy to be destroyed*, St. Paul said (1 Corinthians 15:26). And since Jesus has, has destroyed it, there is nothing left. Nothing left to keep you from life. Life in Jesus. So no more *if onlys*. ***If only you had been here.*** Jesus is here, and there is life.

You see, for the Christian, *death is not a part of life*, and *death is not the end of life*. Because of Jesus, **life is now the end of death.**

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.