**John 11:17-27,38-45** March 29, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Lent 5

*John 11:17On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 21“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” 23Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” 25Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” 27“Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world…”*

*38Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39“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.” 40Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” 41So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42I 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.” 43When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44The 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.” 45Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Jesus Keeps Us Focused**

**Stability When Things Go Crazy**

Let’s entertain a fun, childish thought for a moment. Remember how when you were a child you thought that if you dug a hole in your back yard and you just keep on digging, you’d end up in, yep, China? And in that innocent way of thinking we all once had, if you dug a hole to China and you popped out on the other side of the world, everything would be upside down, right? That’s how we once thought. China. That land on the opposite side of the world, where you have to stand upside down all the time. Crazy place. To our American minds, from childhood on, China is the embodiment of everything exotic and different. They have panda bears and 2,000 mile long walls and silk robes and what an alphabet! All so different!

And so six to eight weeks ago when you heard the word “Coronavirus,” for the first time you stumbled over it and figured that since it was happening in China, you (and I) could just blow it off. It sounded weird, like the sort of thing you hear from far-off, exotic China.

Then, it was a planeload of people quarantined on their arrival in the US. Then, whispers of a nursing home in Seattle. (By that point you knew how to pronounce Coronavirus.) Then, as a colleague of mine loved to say: then for two weeks you couldn’t buy toilet paper for love or money. Then, Kentucky restaurants and schools closed—was that only two weeks ago?—other businesses closed, gatherings were banned. A week ago or so, the county’s first case was spotted. Those distant rumors from a far-off land now define life.

What is different in your life from just a month ago? Everything! We didn’t think life could change this quickly. Some of us like to pretend we just march on. We don’t. I mean, we do, but virtually every choice we make in the course of every day has been changed by the current situation.

As we look at the situation, we pray: God save us from the worst, help those who are experiencing it, and protect those who have to deal with it!

Jesus stood with a woman whose reality had been bitterly and completely turned upside-down. Not on an international level, on a personal level. Her situation was a funeral. She, Martha, and her sister Mary were bereft of their brother, Lazarus. We don’t know if these siblings Mary, Marth and Lazarus had their own families. You get the impression that these three stayed together, unmarried. While their ages are never mentioned, it would seem that they were probably young, maybe 20’s or 30’s. Lazarus had contracted an unspecified illness and he died. The sisters were devastated.

A couple days later Jesus walked into the visitation and had a chat with Martha. He spoke a central truth of the Jewish faith (and our faith), ***“Your brother will rise again.”*** Jesus wanted Martha to find stability in her crisis. He wanted her to find comfort in God’s promised plans for his people.

Our emotions are powerful things. We keep them under control most of the time. But when we get into deep unknown waters, our emotions often overrun our reason. We suddenly get irrational. We buy hundreds of rolls of toilet paper, we sell when stocks are low, we flee a disease only to spread it to others, we get angry and yell at people we love. Jesus wants Martha to master her feelings of loss and grief with the truth of God’s promises. ***“Your brother will rise again.”*** This is a truth that should point us to true north in every situation. It’s all about eternity. For people who know their Savior, that is a tremendous comfort.

Martha responded, ***“I know he will rise again.”*** There are times I just wish we had an audio recording of the Bible. Knowing just the words isn’t enough. For example, you retired army sergeants might enjoy telling us how many different ways have you heard those familiar words, “Yes, sir!” over the years. “Yes, sir!” [with the snap of obedience]. “Yes, sir!” [a sneer]. “Yes, sir!” [a low humiliated voice]. You see, it’s not just the words, it’s how you say the words.

When Jesus said, ***“Your brother will rise again,”*** how did Martha answer. Did she say, ***“I know he will rise again”*** [dismissed with a wave of the hand]. Some people react that way to Jesus, “Yah, yah. I get it. You like to talk about Jesus. But let’s talk about something practical.” To them religion is a delusion. They view it as a crutch to others. It stands in the way of progress and science, an ancient superstition that we should have long outgrown. Talk about Jesus and eternal life, and many people suddenly find that they are in a hurry to get somewhere, anywhere.

Or maybe Martha responded, ***“I know he will rise again”*** [with a sorrowful sigh.] That is the beleaguered, tired voice of the mourner. “So Christians are going to rise someday and go to heaven. I know that! But I hurt now.” It happens at a funeral, or losing a job, or a heartbreak. There might even be a little glimmer of interest, but it is overwhelmed by life.

Or maybe Martha responded was, ***“I know he will rise again”*** [with a reawakened confidence]. Judging from the context, this probably was her tone. This is what Jesus wants the resurrection to do for all people. He wants it to be a foundation built on solid bedrock, so that when the rain pours down and the streams rise and the winds blow, faith stands. The resurrection to eternal life has been the stay of Christians in health or disease, in peace or war, in poverty or wealth, in worship or under persecution. And it is based on only one thing, Jesus Christ. It is the knowledge that his death and life were the one-time sacrifice for all the things we have ever done against God.

Jesus continued with Martha, ***“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.”*** It’s all locked up in Christ Jesus. Yes, he makes an exclusivity claim here.

**This Hope Doesn’t Deny How We Feel**

So, does this truth negate all emotion? Can we walk into a funeral and… Let me tell you about something that happened several years ago in another place, not China but Africa. In the part of Africa where we lived, when there is a funeral, people mourn. They wail like nothing you have ever heard. I can assure you, you have never heard anything like it. The first time you hear it, it is distressing. It is a crying screech from hundreds of voices, the noise of death. I said that the first time you hear it, it is distressing. That’s not true. You never get used to it. It is something so visceral that when I still imagine it and the coffin bearers trudging across the red-brown earth, or the dust wafting up as they shovel dirt into the grave, just imagining that wailing sound can still bring tears to my eyes. Well, there was a Christian from America attending one of these Christian funerals, and when the people started the wailing, he stood up and told people, “Stop crying? You are Christians who know about Jesus and the Resurrection.” Without talking about all the other questions this brings up, is that what God’s plan for you in eternity means? Does it mean that you don’t cry at a funeral. Does it mean that we are people of faith to the *exclusion* of emotion?

Over the centuries, some Christians have thought that. And sometimes people like me who don’t always show a lot of emotion, we can give that impression. May it never be!

What is the shortest verse of the Bible? [At least in the King James translation.] ***“Jesus wept.”*** When he saw the grief of Martha and Mary, he wept. Verse 38 of our reading adds, ***“Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb.”***

Remember that in the uncertainty of disease, when sitting in the shadow of death. Jesus did not tell the mourners, “Your faith means you shouldn’t be sad.” And, Jesus didn’t counsel them to have a ‘celebration of life’ for Lazarus. No, Jesus saw death and the mourners, and he wept. He saw what we try to forget: death is the curse of human sin. And so while we rejoice in a Christian who is welcomed into heaven through death, while we can thank God for the blessing a person has been to us, we need to keep our eyes focused, not on this life, but on life beyond the grave. That is where Jesus lifted Martha’s eyes. We need our eyes lifted.

**This Hope Puts This Life In Perspective**

Right now, you and I are surrounded with about 36 layers of 24/7 coverage of the Coronavirus. It dominates every news brief on the hour. But hourly updates aren’t enough. We have this constant itch to glance at our phones and PCs, to be sure we have the latest news on this pandemic. Maybe even some of you out there tuning in by live stream are only half listening, while you click through websites just to be sure you haven’t missed anything. I’ve been there. We get so consumed with the here and now that we forget the hereafter. Do you know what is missing from virtually every bit of news you get? Perspective. The balance of this world and eternity. For all of the stories about prevention and preparation, for all the stories of tragedy, never do these stories lift our eyes beyond our few years on this world to eternity. Sure, we should be safe, for the sake of others and for our own sake. But have you wondered how many victims were prepared to meet their maker? Have you prepared yourself if, God forbid, something should happen in your family? Are you ready? Are they?

That is what Jesus was doing with Martha when he said, ***“Your brother will rise again.”*** He was administering a test kit to Martha, not for a disease, but for faith in a time of mourning. He wanted her eyes focused, not on the sorrows of this world, but on the joy of heaven.

So, Jesus went to the tomb. He ordered the stone removed. In a loud voice he cried out the most absurd sentence ever uttered in the history of mankind. He shouted at a dead man, ***“Lazarus, come out!”*** And he did.

Jesus did not do this for Lazarus, so he would have a couple more years on this world. Jesus didn’t do this to get Martha and Mary to stop crying. Jesus raised Lazarus to prove that he has the authority to say, ***“Your brother will rise again”*** and ***“I am the resurrection and the life.”***  Jesus is the master of death and the giver of eternal life.

Jesus’ words focusing our eyes on eternal life are not just for times of sorrow. It is for the times when all goes wrong and for when we win the lottery. It is for funerals, and for when a newborn baby is first cradled in his mother’s arms. It is for whatever we feel now in our current emergency, whether anxiety or fear or frustration or fatigue. Jesus keeps us focused through all the events and emotions of living in this world when says, ***“Your brother will rise again.”*** May our answer be as heartfelt as Martha’s when she added, ***“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”*** Amen.