

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.¹⁸ Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.²⁰ When 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.²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;²⁶ and 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.” ...³⁸ Jesus, 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.”

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.⁴² I 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.”

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The 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.”

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. (John 11:17-27, 38-45)

How Did Jesus Comfort Martha?

Comfort is hard to give. For example, when we face the situation Jesus was in this morning: someone has died and we have to comfort the people who loved him or her. What do we do? What do we say? Sometimes we try to get them to look on the bright side: “At least they’re not suffering any more.” But what if they weren’t in real pain before they died? What if they were young and healthy with their whole lives ahead of them? Maybe we say, “At least they didn’t suffer.” Or “At least you got to say good-bye.” But does that really ease the pain of losing someone you love? Another approach is to show solidarity. That’s why we go to funerals and visitations. That’s why we gather in hospitals when the end is near. And there is some comfort in that. But we often walk away wishing we could do more. So sometimes, we fall back on platitudes: “It’s all for the best.” “It’ll be OK, you’ll see.” “They wouldn’t want you to be sad.” None of those statements gives any real comfort, but we hear them coming out of our mouths because we don’t know what else to say. All these efforts really fall short. But this morning, Jesus gives us a better option. **How did Jesus comfort Martha?**

I. He made a promise to her.

II. He proved he could keep that promise.

I.

Martha sometimes gets a “bad rap” because of another time when Jesus visited her and her sister, Mary and their brother, Lazarus. On that occasion, Mary sat at his feet and listened to him teach while Martha prepared the meal. When Martha complained, Jesus told her that Mary had chosen the one thing needful. At that time, Martha showed the weakness in her faith. But that doesn’t mean she wasn’t a Christian. In our text for today, she shows the strength in her faith. Martha was a no nonsense, practical minded Christian. If she belonged to our congregation, she’d be one of the women we count on to plan soup suppers and Easter breakfasts and to generally make sure that things got done. She would’ve made a good German Lutheran. Like all good German Lutherans, she was only stoic on the outside. On the inside, she loved her family and her Lord. When she lost her brother, she was deeply hurt. Being a no nonsense, practical Christian, when Jesus came, she didn’t hide like her sister. She went to see him, because she knew he had what she needed. **How did Jesus comfort Martha? He made a promise to her.**

When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Because to this day, Jews bury their dead as soon as possible, that means that he had only been dead for four or five days. But Jesus could've gotten there sooner. In fact, after hearing that Lazarus was sick, Jesus waited two more days before even starting out for their home. He intentionally waited until Lazarus was dead. When Martha saw him, she couldn't help uttering a reproach: "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" I think we can understand her feelings. She had lost her brother and she knew Jesus could've saved him.

What strikes me is not the fact that she let Jesus know how she felt. It's what she said afterward: "**But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.**" What was she hinting at? Doesn't it have to be that Jesus could still raise Lazarus from the dead? He had done that at least twice before. She held out the hope that he might do it again. But when Jesus answered, "**Your brother will rise again.**" Martha heard that as "No." Maybe she was expecting Jesus to say something like "Do you want me to raise him?" But when he said, "Your brother will rise again," she thought he was saying, "Lazarus has gone to heaven, but on the last day, he will rise again." So she confessed her faith in that promise of God: "**I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.**" Then she dropped it.

But Jesus said, "**I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?**" Why did he even need to ask that? She had said that she believed that Lazarus would rise on the last day. Jesus asked because he wanted to make sure that her comfort was where it's supposed to be. Many people hope for some kind of afterlife. They may even call it heaven. But no matter how close it is to the biblical concept, it is not the same if that hope doesn't begin and end with Jesus. Only believers in Christ will rise to eternal life. Only Christians will go to heaven when they die.

Jesus is the resurrection and the life because only in him do we conquer death. Jesus promised, "**He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.**" Death was not the end of Lazarus. It's not the end for us either. Our bodies will die, if Jesus doesn't return first. But they will live again. That's the central promise of Christianity. We will rise from the dead. Jesus promised, "**And the one who lives and believes in me will never die.**" Our life does not end when our heart stops and our brain waves cease. We continue to live in heaven. That's how Jesus comforted Martha. Now, he didn't deny he was going to raise Lazarus that day. That's why he came there. But he focused Martha not on a temporary deliverance from death now, but on a permanent and lasting defeat of sin and death. Then he asked her, "**Do you believe this?**" And she said, "**Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.**"

Jesus took Martha back to what she already knew. He didn't come up with some new and clever insight. He reminded her of who her Savior is. He repeated his promise of life now and forever for the brother she loved. That's what we need to know when we face the same situation. Most of us have attended funerals. We will all do so again, unless the next one is our own. More than that, we all know people who are suffering. What Jesus said here doesn't just apply when someone dies. It applies across the board, because every pain and hurt that we suffer is a miniature death. Death is the natural result of our own sin and of sin in the world. Every hurt that we feel comes from the fact that we are sinners and from the fact that sin has corrupted everything and everyone around us. All our pain is a bigger or smaller taste of the same medicine. The cure for all of it is the same. It's Jesus.

Jesus felt pain, too. But all the pain he ever felt was caused by living in a sinful world. None of it was caused by his own sin, because he had no sin. He deserved a life with no pain or sorrow at all. But he did feel all that we feel. He did hurt and weep and eventually die. He did all that for us. On the cross, Jesus suffered everything that the sin of the whole world – including ours – deserves. He died because we deserve to. Then he rose. His resurrection makes him the resurrection and the life.

Every one who believes in him will live forever. Dying won't even interrupt our life. Every pain and sorrow of this life is temporary. God can end them all here and now, if that's what's best for us. But if it isn't, he will take them all away when we join him in heaven. As soon as life leaves our bodies, our souls will join him there. When he returns and raises us, we will live with him in perfection forever. That's the promise he made to us. What he said to Martha is the best possible guide for us when we need to comfort each other. He promised her that he would conquer all that she was suffering. He kept that promise. Repeat that promise to the people God calls you to comfort.

After he spoke to Martha, Jesus spoke to Mary. That conversation isn't a part of our text for this morning. But the famous passage "Jesus wept" comes from that section. Jesus knew exactly what he was going to do. But seeing people that he loved suffer pained his heart. When he went to the tomb, the crowd of people who were there comforting the family followed him, assuming he was going to visit the grave. He was deeply moved again by all this sorrow. Up to this point, nothing terribly unusual had happened. But then Jesus surprised them all. He said, "**Take away the stone.**" The tomb was a cave with a boulder blocking the entrance. No one could believe what Jesus wanted them to do. Martha, the practical Christian, said, "**But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.**" The King James was less delicate, but more memorable. It said, "he stinketh." Palestine is a hot country. The Jews didn't spend much time on embalming. Without a doubt, Martha was right. And the last thing she wanted was the trauma of smelling her brother's rotting flesh.

But Jesus insisted: "**Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?**" This was the clue that he was going to grant her request. And the tomb was opened. Then Jesus prayed a prayer that laid it all on the line for Mary and Martha and for all the people gathered there. He said, "**Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I 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.**" Anybody standing there should've realized what was coming. Jesus was asking the Father to raise Lazarus. And he already knew the answer, because he is God. This prayer says, "Pay attention to who I am. I am the One that God promised to send. I am the Messiah, the Chosen Savior. This action will prove it to all of you."

You know what came next. Jesus shouted, "**Lazarus, come out!**" And he did. Everyone saw it. It did cause many to believe in him. So many, in fact, that Jesus' enemies planned to kill Lazarus again, to undercut Jesus' support. Jesus did all this to call his people to faith. For Martha and for us, Jesus did this to demonstrate that his promise was true. Lazarus died again. But Lazarus lives in heaven now, Lazarus will rise yet again on Judgment Day, because Jesus lived and died and rose to give him eternal life. Jesus' promised Martha that he would conquer sin and death for her brother. Then he demonstrated that he could. Jesus has promised to conquer sin and death for us. And he did it. He died on the cross. He rose from the dead, just as he raised Lazarus, to say to us, "I have the power. Trust me. Trust my word."

When I was a missionary in Colombia, one Sunday, there was a big write up in the paper about a family whose child had died. They refused to bury that child because their pastor had convinced them that he would rise again, if they prayed hard enough. That isn't what God promises us with this account. You and I don't get to see Jesus now. We don't get to take him out to the tombs of our loved ones and watch him raise them. Of the thousands of people who died during his life, Jesus raised only three. But those three are a testimony of his power. We find that power in one place only: in the gospel. With the gospel, God defeats Satan. He conquers the sin in our hearts. He wipes away our sorrow and he gives and strengthens faith in our hearts. The gospel, the message of Jesus' love, of his life and death and resurrection, of his gift of eternal life to you and me, that gospel is greater than our sin. It's greater than our death. It's greater than hell itself. It saves us from all of those things now and forever. That's what we need to know when we face pain and hurt. **How did Jesus comfort Martha? He proved that he could keep his promise.** That assurance conquers the power of death and sin in our lives and our hearts.

How will you comfort each other? Follow Jesus. Take people back to what they already know. It may feel like that's nothing, but that's what Jesus did! Can we do more? Take them to Jesus. Take them to his death for their sins and most of all to his promise of eternal life. Take them to his promise that all the pain and sin and sorrow of this life is only temporary. He will undo it all. Point them not just to Lazarus' resurrection – point them to Jesus' resurrection. The cross proves that God does love us in all that we suffer here. But the empty tomb proves that Jesus has conquered our sin and it's only a matter of time until he keeps his promise. We will live with him forever. That's the only comfort that really matters. Amen.