

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.”

²⁸ And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.”²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.³⁴ “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (John 11:17-37)

Mary and Martha: The Resurrection and the Life

When you go to a funeral or to the visitation for a funeral, do you struggle for words? Do you find yourself reaching for one of the stock phrases, like, “I’m sorry for your loss”? Do you choke up when you try to talk to a family member? Funerals are very emotional times. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve actually found that it’s harder for me to officiate at a funeral without choking up during the service. Some of you may recall that happened recently. It worries me a little bit because losing control of your emotions is one of the symptoms of dementia. But I think it’s more because I’ve been your pastor for a long time now and I’ve come to know many of our families pretty well. So that emotion sometimes just gets the best of me. So, I find it comforting to see how Jesus reacted in that kind of situation. In today’s conversation with Christ, Jesus is comforting two sisters who’ve lost their brother. But he does more than just weep with them. He points them to **the resurrection and the life**.

I.

Today’s conversation with Christ is really two conversations with two sisters, Mary and Martha. These two ladies lived with their brother, Lazarus and Jesus was a friend of the family. That closeness probably affected the way the conversation went, but almost certainly Jesus would’ve made the same points with people he wasn’t as close to. He offered them **the resurrection and the life: a gospel promise for the hardest days**.

This was that kind of a day. Several days before this conversation took place, Mary and Martha had sent a message to Jesus because their brother was dying and they wanted Jesus to come and heal him. But Jesus didn’t come right away. By the time he did reach their home, Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days. Jesus encountered Martha first. She went out to meet him and said, **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”**

What was she feeling? She was angry and hurt. She was scolding Jesus. “Lord, we sent you word. You could’ve come. You’ve healed so many people. Why didn’t you come and heal my brother?” Do you

think we human beings get to say things like that to the Son of God? Not really. Jesus gets to decide who he heals and who he calls home. But Martha's words are not that unusual, even for a believer. Faithful Christians who pray and ask God to spare their spouse, their child, their parent sometimes feel angry and hurt when he doesn't. I wish we all had the kind of perfect faith that would simply accept that God knows best. But then, if we had perfect faith, we wouldn't need Jesus. And Jesus knows that. There is no account in the gospels that shows more clearly that Jesus understands how much it hurts to be a Christian in a sinful and broken world and how much he cares about our hurt. Not once in this whole account does Jesus reprimand Mary or Martha for their weak faith. Instead, he ministers to them in their sorrow and lifts them up.

Now, Martha's faith was not gone. She added a very interesting statement: **"But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."** What did she mean by that? She may have just been saying that she still believed that Jesus was the Savior. But it sure sounds to me like she was hinting at Jesus doing the miracle that he actually came there to do: raise Lazarus. Whatever she was hinting at, Jesus said, **"Your brother will rise again."** Martha answered, **"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."** That was a very important confession of faith. It is, finally, what we have to cling to when we stand next to the casket of a loved one: those believers that we know and love will rise on the last day. So, Martha was not off base.

But Jesus wanted to underline that truth to give her the best possible support for her faith, so he made one of the most famous statements in all of Scripture: **"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."** Without Jesus, death is horrible and painful and terrifying because death is what our sin deserves. Death is God's punishment on us sinners for all those terrible things that we spend our lives thinking and wanting and doing and saying. Death leads to the deepest darkness. It's not just the unknown because God tells us what comes after death: judgment and hell. Only in Christ is that judgment taken away. Only in Christ is that hell turned into heaven. Only in Christ does death become life. So Jesus pointed to himself. He is our resurrection. He will raise these bodies. He is our life. We live now by faith, we will live in heaven, we will live with him forever in a new and perfect world only because he came here to conquer death and defeat sin and give us that life.

So, Jesus gave us twin promises. **"He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."** Even if these bodies are buried or burned or eaten by sharks, these bodies will live. As Martha said, we will rise on the last day. But what about between then and now? Jesus said, **"Whoever lives and believes in me will never die."** Even though Lazarus' body was four days in the grave and already decaying and stinking, he was alive. His soul was with the Father in heaven. That is true for us, too. In fact, in our funeral practice, that's the point we focus on most: grandma has gone home. She is with Jesus. She is free from all pain and sorrow and sin. And when Jesus returns, she will rise and live with him forever.

Then Jesus asked, **"Do you believe this?"** And Martha said, **"Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."** Can't we see a change in Martha? Jesus came to her with God's answer to her hurt and sorrow, and she confessed her faith in her Lord and Savior and what did she do next? She went and called her sister. Why? Doesn't it have to be because she took tremendous comfort in her Savior's words and she wanted her sister to know that same comfort?

My friends, this is our comfort, too! Jesus is our resurrection and our life. Until God calls us home, we will have to go to funeral after funeral. We will pray for the sick and the dying and the hurting. We will watch our parents and our siblings and our children struggle with all that life in a sinful world does to them. The answer to all that pain and sorrow is Jesus. He died. He rose. He conquered it all. And he will give us life. He will free us from all pain. And he will comfort us and care for us while we are here with his gospel message. And he gives us that same message to share with each other. Now, that doesn't mean you just have to recite what Jesus said here. But whatever words you use, there is no greater comfort you can give to someone who is grieving than Jesus' victory over death.

II.

I've always found a certain amount of irony in this account. Martha is famous for having her priorities out of whack. The only other time we meet her, she storms in and asks Jesus to reprimand her sister for leaving her with all the work. And Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen what is better: hearing the gospel. But today, their roles are reversed. Martha confesses faith in the gospel and Jesus is able to talk with her and comfort her. Mary, on the other hand, doesn't look quite so mature in her faith. But Jesus offers her, too, **the resurrection and the life: a gospel promise from the most caring of hearts.**

But he didn't get to say it to her. Jesus had to show it to Mary. She wasn't ready for words yet. When Martha told her that Jesus was asking for her, Mary jumped up and went to him. But then she said the exact same thing that Martha had: "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" I don't think that was a coincidence. Mary and Martha had had at least four days to mourn and talk together. One or both of them had said this and now, it was the narrative in their minds. But there was a difference between the two sisters. Mary came and fell at Jesus' feet and said this. John describes her as weeping there on the ground. Mary was a mess. She was shattered and emotional – and she wasn't alone. A crowd of people had followed her and were egging her on with their own weeping.

And Jesus didn't answer her. He just walked with her to Lazarus' tomb. And he wept. Why did he do that? Jesus had come to raise Lazarus. He was going to do that in just a few minutes. He knew there was nothing to cry about. They had lost nothing. But Jesus wept. Why? John says, "**When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.**" Jesus wasn't weeping because Lazarus was dead. He was weeping because of all the pain and sorrow that you and I have to face because sin has ruined this world and ends our lives. He was weeping the way a parent might weep when he or she learns that their child has some terrible disease and now has to face surgery or chemo or life without sight or hearing. We call it empathy. It only comes from a heart that's focused on other people.

Jesus loved Mary. He hated to see her hurt. But he knew she wasn't ready yet to hear the gospel, so he did the only thing that he could at that moment: he walked with her. He shared her tears. My friends, does that seem like nothing to you? Don't be fooled. It is a tremendous gift of God. We call it fellowship. We are one family together under God. We are called to share each other's joys and sorrows. Sometimes that means just being there with someone who's hurting. And if you don't think that matters, talk to someone who's lost someone. They will tell you how much it meant to them to have people who loved them just be there. That empathy, that love is the love of Christ put into action. It is the fruit of the gospel. And God uses it. It's not the gospel itself. But it paves the way to the gospel – when they're ready listen. If God's plan for Mary had been that she would have to heal and learn to live with her loss, when the time was right, Jesus would've shared his promises with her just like he did with Martha. But that was for another day.

I deliberately left the ending of this story out of the reading, because our series this summer is about the conversations with Christ. But you can't talk about this conversation with the ending. As Jesus walked to that tomb and wept, some of the people there asked the same question Mary and Martha had asked, "**Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?**" That's the question every person asks in the middle of tragedy. It's the question that many unbelievers use to justify their unbelief. And, of course, they were right: Jesus absolutely could've healed Lazarus. But he didn't, on purpose. Lazarus died so that Jesus could come and raise him to show that he has all power over life and death and that in the end, Jesus will conquer all that hurts. Jesus will raise every believer from the dead and we will live with him in a new and perfect world forever. Until that day comes, everything he does is designed to get us to that new life. Sometimes that means he lets us suffer. Sometimes that means people we love die. Some day it will mean that each of us will die, unless he comes back first. But Jesus raised Lazarus to tell us that all that pain and loss is temporary. We will win in the end. Rather than just saying that to Mary or to us, Jesus shouted, "**Lazarus, come out!**" And he did.

Many years ago, long before I became a pastor, I was sitting in a Bible class. I don't remember what it was about. But I do remember that it suddenly hit me: our faith is all about death. We need Jesus because we are all doomed to die. Luther considered death to be the last great challenge we have to face, the last chance for the devil to steal our faith and drag us down to hell. But Jesus died and rose and he defeated death. He conquered all pain and sorrow and sin. And he comes to us when we mourn and he strengthens our faith with his promise of life and love. He comes to us in our last hour in that same promise and he carries us through that last temptation and home to him. Because Jesus is **the resurrection and the life**. Amen.