

**Sermon – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent**  
**John 11:1-41**  
**March 29, 2020**  
**“Yes Lord, I Believe”**

The fascinating thing about our story from John is how Martha, a grieving sister, could on the one hand say to Jesus *“I know that God will give you whatever you ask”*, and at the same time give an rather uncertain answer when Jesus asks her if she believed that could include eternal life. We must conclude from verses 25-27 that she believed Jesus could heal a dying brother but not necessarily raise a dead one. *“I know that God will give you whatever you ask”* is a rather qualified “whatever” - confined to the visible world with no apparent consideration given to an eternal one. Martha’s response was a take on the old adage *“an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”* – as though saying *“if you’d have come in time to deal with his fever, you wouldn’t now have to visit his grave.”*

We might be prone to ask a similar question these days – Lord, if you had stopped this pandemic we wouldn’t be hearing of folks who are gravely ill, the many who’ve died and overwhelmed medical workers, or ourselves call the unemployment office, wonder about the survival of our businesses, and isolate ourselves from one another just when spring is inviting us outdoors and our Easter Day celebrations are just weeks away. What Martha didn’t know or didn’t perceive is that Jesus was already countering the effects of human suffering and death by his ministry on earth.

He talked endlessly to anyone who’d give him the opportunity of gracious forgiveness and life to those who trust that God would give such a gift to a sinner in the first place. He’d rehearsed that message with her just moments before...*I am the resurrection and the life...he who believes in me, though he die yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. You believe that don’t you Martha? You do believe that, don’t you?*

And of course, what Lazarus was about to discover, what Martha and her sister Mary heard but only dimly if at all understood is what we asserted with confidence at the start of our gathering – *“in the mercy of almighty God Jesus Christ was given to die for us and for his sake God forgives us all our sins.”* Romans 8 serves as a clarification of what that means – saying in verse 1; *“therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* and again in verse 11 *“if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies.”*

Death, the issue in our lessons today, is a terrible separation. For now, sadly, well over 1000 families in our nation this pandemic has visited them with the sadness of Mary and Martha. We must pray in faith that the Lord comfort them and sustain all those who work to cure the gravely ill.

Most of us are experiencing what I should like to call “mini-deaths” – in so far as we’ve suffered separation from one another, or lost our jobs, or been kept out of our school rooms, or simply live under a cloud of anxiety about how far this will go and how fast it will abate.

We could all be excused for wondering, as Martha did, if some “preemptive prayers” to God months ago *“could have done something.”* Instead, we must observe what remains of Lent 2020 believing what Martha could only bring herself to the edge of saying – anyone who knows and believes in Jesus, *“though they die yet shall they live.”* Jesus Christ went to the town of Mary, Martha and Lazarus to demonstrate what God intends for those who grieve and suffer separation – an end to it. What grieves you grieves God – the tears of Jesus in this story is proof positive of that. What separates us from joy and peace is God’s enemy too. God will overcome all of that, and so too dear people, will we.

Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God’s mercy – God with a human face and a human heart. The same Jesus whose voice would moments after quizzing Martha, call Lazarus from death into life, the One in whose presence no dead body will remain dead –who mourned with friends when they were grieving, who himself would soon be saying his farewells to his own family and friends, this Jesus – God with a human heart - knows how awful illness and dying and grieving is.

In the moment he stood before Lazarus’ tomb and wept, Jesus knew what was in store for him too. And while they were likely tears of sadness, don’t for a moment exclude the possibility that Jesus might have been the very first person to go to a grave and cry tears of joy. I don’t want to overstate the obvious, but Jesus was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. What could be a happier moment than that – than the Lord of life rehearsing what his own death would do to death – end it?

Like Martha long ago, we might strain mightily to understand why God does not intercede each time we suffer, perhaps because we cannot like her fully comprehend resurrection and eternal life and the fullness of that mystery. Yet that is precisely what we say we believe when, as we will in a few minutes, in Jesus, *“who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried”*...and then that *“we believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”*

When God created us, God didn't make us immune from grief. He made it possible, even intentional simply by giving us the capacity to love. Grief in some sense is love in action – and right now it has some heavy lifting to do – helping us bear one another’s sorrows and fears. No, instead of immunity to grief and the circumstances that cause it, God binds us to his risen Son making us people who grieve just like he did, recalling that those tears of our Lord were doing double duty - they mourned illness and death and its sadness, and then saw life and it’s joy – and soon, by the mercy of our God, will we as well. God strengthen and encourage you through the week ahead. AMEN