

## THEME: THE LIFE THAT WE HAVE IN CHRIST

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

While we served in Brazil, a man who had helped us with securing housing suddenly passed away from a heart attack. We learned that most Brazilians are not embalmed and are buried within 24 hours of their death. Out of respect, we attended the visitation. I will spare you the details, but let me say that the ravages of death were on full display as he lay in his coffin. As we approached the coffin, we became fully aware of why it is tradition to give flowers at a funeral. It isn't for their beauty but for their fragrance. There is a particular detail in our Gospel reading today that reminded me of that Brazilian funeral. When Jesus orders the stone to be rolled away from the tomb of Lazarus, Martha protests. She says, **"By this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."** The King James Version put it more bluntly, **"Lord, by this time he stinketh."**

That is the reality of our condition. Death is not a "natural part of life," as the world tries to tell us to soothe our grieving hearts. Death is an intruder. It is a predator. It is the **"wages of sin" (Romans 6:23)**. And by the time we reach the four-day mark, the reality of our rebellion against God—the corruption of our flesh—is undeniable. It stinks.

We find ourselves today in Bethany, a town whose name likely means "House of Affliction." We find ourselves standing with two sisters who are caught between a faith they know in their heads and a grief that is tearing out their hearts. And into this house of affliction, into this stench of death, comes the Word made Flesh.

When Jesus arrives, both Martha and Mary say the same thing to Him: **"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."**

How many of us have lived in that "if only"?

- "If only I had caught the symptoms earlier..."
- "If only the doctor hadn't made that mistake..."
- "If only I had said 'I love you' one last time..."

Martha's faith is real, but it is a faith struggling under the weight of the clock. She believes Jesus is a miracle worker, but she believes his power is subject to the timeline of the grave. She thinks he is "too late."

And notice how Jesus gently pushes her beyond her misbelief. He says, **"Your brother will rise again."** Martha responds with a perfect, Sunday-school, orthodox answer: **"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."** Martha believes the doctrine. She believes in the *event* of the resurrection at the end of time. For Martha, the resurrection is a distant, abstract promise—something to look forward to when the world ends, but of little comfort while the tomb is still sealed and the house still smells of funeral spices.

Jesus does not let her stay in that abstract future. He brings the Resurrection out of the "someday" and into the "now." He looks her in the eye and utters the fifth great "I AM" of John's Gospel: **"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"**

This is the hinge of the entire narrative. Jesus does not say, "I will bring the resurrection" or "I have the power to resurrect." He says, **"I AM."** In the Greek, this is the Divine Name of God. This is Yahweh speaking from the burning bush, now standing in the dust of a graveyard. Jesus is telling Martha—and He is telling you today—that the Resurrection is not a *date* on a calendar. The Resurrection is a **Person**.

If you have Jesus, you have the Resurrection. If you are baptized into Christ, you are already standing on the other side of the grave. The "Last Day" has broken into the present moment because the Lord of the Last Day is standing in front of Martha...and he is here with us right now.

As we move toward the tomb in verse 38, we see a side of Jesus that is often misunderstood. The text says he was **"once more deeply moved"** as He came to the tomb. The Greek word used here describes the snorting of a warhorse. It implies a deep, guttural anger or indignation. But why is Jesus angry? He isn't just "sad" that his friend died. He is the Creator looking at what the Devil and sin have done to His creation. He is looking at the "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26) face-to-face. Jesus does not come to the tomb to offer a "celebration of life" service. He comes to the tomb as a warrior. He comes to reclaim what belongs to him. He groans in spirit because he sees the weeping of Mary, the confusion of Martha, and the cold finality of the stone, and he says, "No more."

Then comes the command. **"Take away the stone."** When the stone is moved, Jesus does not perform a ritual. He does not use a magic wand. He uses the same tool He used to create the light and everything else in Genesis 1. He uses **The Word**. **"Lazarus, come out!"**

The Word of God is never just "information." The Word of God is "action." When Jesus speaks, reality changes. When he says, "Your sins are forgiven," they are gone. When he says, "This is My body," it is. And when he says to a four-day-old corpse, "Come out," death has no choice but to obey. Lazarus emerges. He is still bound in linen. He is a living man dressed like a dead one. And Jesus gives the final command to the community: **"Take off the grave clothes, and let him go."**

Now we ask that quintessential Lutheran question: What does this mean for us believers who hold fast to this Word in a world that mocks the idea of a physical resurrection?

The Law tells us that we are Lazarus. Apart from Christ, we are not just "sick" or "spiritually struggling." We are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are in the dark, behind a stone we cannot move, and we "stink" with the decay of our own sin—our pride, our lust, our anger, our self-righteousness. We cannot "decide" to come out of the grave. A dead man cannot choose to live.

But the Gospel tells us that **The Word** has spoken over you. In your Baptism, Jesus called your name. He said, "Richard, come out!" He clothes you not in grave clothes, but in his own robe of righteousness—the very robe we wear today and forever.

Notice that Lazarus eventually died again. This miracle was a "sign"—a preview of a greater Resurrection. Jesus raised Lazarus to show that he had the authority to lay down his own life and take it up again. His disciples would need to remember that truth in the dark days to come.

Because the sinless Jesus died and went into a tomb—not for four days, but for three—and because he came out and left the grave clothes behind forever, death has been transformed for the Christian. For you, death is no longer a prison; it is a locker room where you change your clothes. It is a sleep from which **The Word** of your Savior will certainly wake you.

Jesus ended his conversation with Martha with a question, and I end this sermon with the same one: **"Do you believe this?"**

Do you believe in the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ? If you do, then the stench of this world—the tragedies, the cancer diagnoses, the broken homes, the aging bodies—does not have the final word. The final word belongs to the One who stands at the mouth of your grave and says, **"I am the Resurrection and the Life."** The stone has been rolled away. The victory is won.

That is THE LIFE THAT WE HAVE IN CHRIST and it is EXACTLY WHAT WE NEED. Amen.