

Lent 5 Ezekiel 37:1–14 Romans 8:11–19 John 11:17–27, 38–45
April 2, 2017 Hymns: 294, 110, 313, 114

What beautiful morning today! The sun is shining and bluebonnets are in bloom. Do the morning temperatures make Winter Texans who already headed home wish they'd stayed a little longer? And we had two wonderful baptisms today! On such a fine day as today, it may seem out of place to preach about, of all things, death. Yet on a beautiful day like today, death is much closer than we would like. Due to this reality, we need to look at how Jesus faced death. He marched into the enemy's darkest valley to bring resurrection and life. **Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life!**

1. He comforts us in our grief. (17–27)

Mary and Martha had not invited death into their lives. Yet their brother Lazarus got sick and died. He had been buried for four days when Jesus arrived at Bethany. Martha went out to meet him and said, ²¹*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.* Martha came face to face with the ugly harm that sin does to the world. Her brokenhearted grief spilled out into words. We understand Martha's grief all too well. How many of us have sat through the funeral of a grandparent, sibling, parent, child or spouse? Perhaps you cried till there were no more tears. Facing the ugliest consequence of sin, many of us have echoed Martha's words to God, "You could have done something to stop this. Why didn't you?" It is not necessarily unbelief. It may be the aching shudder of grief.

Yet Martha expressed hope in the middle of her grief. *Even now, God will give you whatever you ask.* Isn't this simply the way a believer talks to God when all else fails? "I don't even know what to ask for, but I know you will do what is right." Such faith in spite of grief is also described in Psalm 130:1, *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice.*

Many friends had come to comfort Mary and Martha. Some probably shared words from Scripture. Some spoke about how he had lived a good life, had so many friends, or made a difference in people's lives. There are many things that we can say to the family at the death of a loved one to show we care and want to help. "I'm sorry. My sympathies. I'm praying for you." But few words can remove the pain of grief at the death of a loved one.

Jesus shared in Mary and Martha's grief, even weeping with them. Yet he did so much more than say, "I'm sorry," and share their pain. He removed the pain of death. ²³*Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."* Jesus made a clear promise of what was about to happen. He would raise Martha's dead brother back to life. She was not thinking about that but instead showed a lively faith in the future resurrection at the Last Day. She trusted her God. Once Martha was thinking along the right lines, Jesus made an even more astounding promise.

²⁵*Jesus said to her, "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?"* The words are simple, yet the promise is breathtaking. At the intersection that each of us will have with death, this is the most refreshing word we could hear. We must pass through death, and then we hear the voice of him who promised us life. Jesus is the resurrection from death to life. He is the one who spoke of his own crucifixion, dying for the sin of the whole world, saying, *The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again.* (John 10:17) Those who believe in Jesus receive a personal promise. The one who believes in Jesus will live, even though he dies. All who live and believe in him will never die, but live forever.

What does it mean to 'never die'? It means that Jesus has the answer to physical death. We surely will breathe our last, but once life (life that is Jesus and life that flows from Jesus) has been planted in us through the gospel, it cannot be uprooted. According to the promise of Jesus,

it is more than “we will live with him someday.” No! We live with him, in him, through him, because of him, now, and such life will never be taken from us.

Do you believe this? Asking this question, Jesus took Martha down the path to a greater reliance on him! She answered, ²⁷*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.* It may have surprised Martha that her response came so quickly. Given in the face of unrelenting grief; it was positive, heroic, and comprehensive. It was the truth. It is our response as we meditate on Jesus’ work this Lent, or any time. The Sundays of Lent are the place to come to deal with our grief. No, they are not a time of mourning about sin but a part of the victory march of him who made the vicarious atonement – payment for sin offered in our place. Defeating the devil’s temptation, quenching spiritual thirst, opening dark eyes to see the Savior, strengthening doubting hearts for service; now even death is vanquished.

2. He has called us from death to life. (38–45)

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” But could he back up those words? Since he was no idle boaster, Jesus showed the power that he claimed to have. ^{38–40}*Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. “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.” Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”*

At the tomb, Jesus was deeply moved. The Greek word carries the sense of a “snort” showing he was upset, even scolding. But he was not scolding the sisters, he was scolding death itself. Jesus was sick and tired of death and how it tears at the whole human race. After a prayer to God for the benefit of the people around him, it was time for Jesus to do something about it! ⁴³*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.”* Jesus fulfilled his promise. There was no mistake—it was Lazarus, still in the burial dress.

This is a preview of two weeks from today – Easter! Death has been swallowed up in victory! Just as a valley of dry bones came to life at the power of God’s word in today’s Old Testament lesson, death could not hold Lazarus against Jesus’ word. Our Savior himself left the grave of his own accord. The same powerful voice that called Lazarus to life even now promises us life saying, *Because I live, you also will live.* (Jn 14:19). He will unlock our tombs as well. There is no doubt that our God has defeated death.

Do you believe this? Jesus calls for faith. We can compare faith to the response of someone whose apartment is on fire. It may be five stories to the ground. Can he trust the firefighters to catch him? When we stand on the precipice of death, be it our own or a loved one’s, we know that Jesus will catch us. That is faith. “Here I come, Jesus. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.”

There are times in all of our lives when, even on beautiful days, sad thoughts fill us with grief. When I feel that way, it seems like I will die tomorrow, and I live cranky or moping. Martin Luther battled such discouragement, too. During one lengthy time when his low spirits seemed to cross over to depression, his wife Katie dressed in her black funeral dress and went to Luther’s study. He looked up, “What is wrong, my Katie? Who died?” She replied, “I do not know, my husband. Your grief is so deep that I assumed that God must have died. I am dressed for his funeral.” Remembering his living Savior ended his grief. That same knowledge is ours. We also live assured that we will live forever because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life.