

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2020

Dear fellow redeemed of the Lord of Life, Saturday, I took my brother up to La Crosse to pick up his bike and while we were up there, we visited our parents and my sister's gravesite.

Though both of my parents have been gone for over a decade, memories of my sister Julie's committal service came flooding back and tears flowed freely.

So, I read the readings for the committal service to remind myself that they aren't gone, just in the nearer presence of God and resting in peace.

One of the social aspects of Facebook is that you can tell others that are safe from whatever the latest natural disaster or in the current context, pandemic. I felt like taking a picture of their gravestones and say, "marked safe from Corona."

I tell you this story to get you to consider the love that we have here on earth for each other. No matter how great it is, it is nowhere near the love that God has for you. No matter how much you loved your gone to heaven friends, God loves them more.

Think about that for a moment.

And while love can inspire fond, memories, at times, love can hurt, and one place the pain can be keenest is at funerals, like the in our Gospel lesson today, Lazarus' funeral.

No matter how many times our world tries to tell us that death is our friend, that's it's just a normal part of life, or even a solution to our problems, funerals show us that is all a lie.

Death is the enemy. Death takes our loved ones away from us, and leaves a hole in our hearts and lives. Whether it happens suddenly or slowly, doesn't really matter, does it? The pain is great. What God has joined together; death has torn asunder.

And then there's the finality of death. If we were estranged from our loved ones, we can always reach out and try to make amends. If they were sick, we can be there for our loved one, sitting at their bedside, holding their hand.

But dead . . . there's nothing we can do. We are helpless. Empty. And then Satan whispers in our ears, and we begin to speak like Mary and Martha.

If only I had been there more . . . ***If only*** I had done things differently . . . ***If only*** I had my loved one back again . . . If only I'd told my sister Julie, X, Y or Z.

But know this: just as the love that we have for each other here on earth doesn't hold a candle to the love that God has for us, so also the ***hate that we have for death is nowhere near the hate that God has for it!***

Consider, how sad are we when *one* person dies?

What then about the sadness of Eden, when because of Adam and Eve's sin, **all of humanity** died? When all of creation was plunged into sin! **That day, Adam and Eve turned Paradise into a cemetery.**

A place where joy was replaced with sadness, and life swallowed up in death.

After the fall into sin the "If only's" came! **If only** you hadn't given me this wife! **If only** you hadn't created that snake! **If only** you had done things differently, God!

Sounds a bit like Mary and Martha, doesn't it?

Sounds like us, too, right? We too like telling God what He should have done, or what He should be doing; as if He needed our advice or help in running the universe.

Lord, **If only there was a cure for cancer. If only you had stopped my loved one from smoking. If only you had stopped that drunk driver.**

And so, in our grief, we cry out, **It's all your fault God!** *As if God doesn't love life and hate death even more than we.*

How do we know that? **Because into this world of death stepped the Lord of life.** God didn't show His love of life and His hatred of death by His tears at Lazarus' grave, He showed it **by being there in our flesh and blood.**

For life is not just what Jesus gives, it is who He is and what He has come to do. And so, He speaks, and His words give life. **Therefore, while Adam and Eve turned Paradise into a cemetery, Jesus turns a cemetery into Paradise.**

Lord, if you had been here . . . Martha, Mary, fellow mourners, **Jesus was there!**

Four days later than then Mary and Martha had hoped. A lot later than Adam and Eve had probably hoped! But it was not too late, but just the right time.

For He has come not to raise *one* dead man, but to be the remedy for the fatal sin-sickness and death of the whole world.

Not just to give us back what we had in this sin-filled life, but to give us even more. Not just life, but eternal life. Not just happiness, but Paradise. And so, Jesus came. At just the right time, **in the fullness of time.**

As we confess in the Creed, He is conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, and made man. The Lord of life come to die, that we who die might rise to life again.

And so, Jesus' encounter with death that day in Bethany was just the prelude to His encounter with death on the cross.

And His visit to the grave that day was just the precursor to His own visit to the

grave – when His lifeless body was itself taken down, wrapped in grave clothes, and laid in a tomb.

Thus, His victory over death with the raising of Lazarus was but the foretaste of His own resurrection. When God would burst the bonds of death not with His Word from without, but with the Word made flesh from within!

When He would strip sin, death, and devil of their power once and for all. Life triumphing over death.

For He is both the resurrection and the life.

But Jesus' raising of Lazarus did not only foreshadow the work that He would accomplish in His own death and resurrection, but also the work that He is doing *in us* and *among us* still today.

His work in Holy Baptism, where by water and His Word Jesus calls us out of the tomb of our sins and raises us to a new life.

And His work in the Word of Absolution, where Jesus frees us from the sins that entangle and ensnare us and threaten to drag us back down to the grave . . . and worse.

Now, as then, Jesus *is here* and is the resurrection and the life for us – that we may live. A new life. Everlasting life.

Oh, I know . . . perhaps you cannot see that truth, or feel it right now. Perhaps you are mired in the trials and troubles of this life, the sin and sickness, the fear of Corona virus, the disappointments and deaths, you feel like Mary and Martha.

Or you look around like Ezekiel and see only dried out heaps of bones – like you're living in a cemetery of dead relationships and dreams, and all you see around you are the tombstones of the past, mocking you and claiming victory over your life.

I know. The if Onlys' came down hard on me when my sister died. So my visit last weekend was cathartic for me. I was able to focus on God's promises and not the devils lies.

So, the good news for us is that in the midst of this **valley of the shadow of death**, your Lord comes **and prepares a table before you in the presence of your enemies.**

He hasn't promised to take you out of these troubles, but *has* promised to come to you and bring to you His life-giving body and blood, that you eat and drink and receive His forgiveness and life.

And so, though your enemies and past mock you, they cannot defeat you. For that grave has already been robbed! That victory has already been won!

For you are in Christ and Christ in you, and as St. Paul told us, you live. **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** Not now. Not ever.

And so you can live, in confidence and peace. Not regretting the past, for it is forgiven. Not dwelling on the “if only’s,” but looking forward to the life that Christ is giving.

And not relying on what we see and feel in this world, but like Lazarus, hearing the Word of Christ and rising to life – each and every day.

Each and every day, your cemetery turned to Paradise. Each and every day, Unbound and set free! Each and every day, we are to **fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.** And so, each and every day, truly living and truly loving, even the present times are particularly evil. **AMEN**