

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Last Sunday, it was the man born blind that offered Jesus an opportunity to display “*the works of God*” (John 9:3). This Sunday it was first the illness and then the death of Jesus’ dear friend, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Jesus told His disciples, “[*This illness*] is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (John 11:4).

In fact, Jesus seemed not at all concerned about Lazarus’ illness. Jesus had left Jerusalem and gone across the Jordan River (John 10:40). That’s where the messengers from the sisters found Him and told Him the bad news. But John tells us that, after hearing about it, Jesus didn’t rush up to Bethany to see Lazarus. He stayed an additional two days (John 11:3, 5).

In the meantime, Lazarus died. John doesn’t report that messengers delivered this bad news, and so, perhaps Jesus with Divine knowledge knew it and prepared to go to Judea. “*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,*” Jesus told His disciples.

Jesus uses this kind of language to talk about death, and so does much of Scripture. David, for example, prays to the Lord: “*Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death*” (Ps. 13:3). “[*O*]ne having the appearance of a man” spoke to Daniel about “*those who sleep in the dust of the earth*” (Dan. 10:18, 12:2). And St. Paul preached about “*those who have fallen asleep*” (1 Thess. 4:14-15) or “*fallen asleep in Christ*” (1 Cor. 15:18).

The disciples didn’t understand it. “*Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.*” “[*T*]hey thought that [*Jesus*] meant taking rest in sleep” (John 11:12-13). But in death, we’re used to Kurt and others who carefully tend the body in death and prepare the body for viewing, making the body look like the loved one is sleeping. We’re used to this kind of language, comparing sleep to death. We sing about Jesus’ “*three day sleep in death* (LSB487:2). We pray “*In my last hour, O grant me A slumber soft and still*” (LSB742:5). We sing, about how “*all who rest beneath the ground Shall from their sleep awaken*” (LSB508:2). We sing to the Lord that at His “*reappearing,*” He will “*from death awaken me*” (LSB708:3).

And that makes sense, for, because of Jesus, that’s ultimately what death is for us who believe in Him. We sing Simeon’s song every Sunday after Holy Communion — “*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant, depart in peace.*” It makes sense; like Simeon, we have just been in the presence of our Lord Jesus, momentarily holding in our mouths His body and blood.

Sometimes, however, we sing Luther’s hymn based on this account: “*In peace and joy I now depart Since God so wills it. Serene and confident my heart; Stillness fills it. For the Lord has promised me That death is but a slumber*”

(LSB938:1). Luther rightly connects this song with death; after all, the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon *“that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ”* (Luke 2:26). And so, in this paraphrase, Luther calls death *“but a slumber.”*

Therefore, we also use Simeon’s song in our funeral liturgy, and there it is juxtaposed with the glorious promise in Jesus’ words in our Gospel. *“I am the resurrection and the life,”* says the Lord. *“He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die”* (LSB, p. 281).

With His death, Christ destroyed our archenemy the devil, who held the power of death (Heb. 2:14). In Christ, death has been defeated—*“swallowed up in victory”* (1 Cor. 15:54), but that is not to say that grim death does not still afflict us. It does. Paul still says, *“in Adam, all die”* (1 Cor. 15:22). And so, we will have to face death, of our loved ones, and of ourselves, even as Jesus had to face the death of His dear friend Lazarus.

Death is a shared experience within the church, not just that we all will die, but that at the death of a brother or sister in Christ, we all mourn. We may not all grieve as sharply as the husband or wife, the son or daughter, of the fellow Christian now deceased, but we grieve, and we come to the visitation and to the funeral of the beloved sibling in Christ. Or we should. I know we have busy lives that sometimes keep us from doing that; and we live self-absorbed lives, but we should seek to share the grief with those who survive. I encourage you to resolve to do it in the future.

The Jews did that. They did it in the home; they had gathered at Mary and Martha’s home to grieve with them and console them. We now gather at a visitation in the funeral home, or here in the narthex of church, with hugs and handshakes, with words of consolation and prayer, and with shared tears.

Martha saw Jesus coming and went out to meet Him. Martha was a bit accusatory: *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”* She was right, of course, but it’s one kind of glory to heal someone, and another kind of glory to raise someone from the dead. Jesus had delayed that the glory that He displayed would be the Divine glory of the Son of God. Therefore, Martha was right also to hope in Jesus even in death: *“But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”* And Jesus comforted Martha with the same words that give us comfort still today: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”*

We didn’t hear it in our Gospel reading this morning, but Martha reported to Mary that Jesus had come, and Mary went out to meet Him. She too, who had sat

at Jesus' feet to be taught by Him, said the same thing to Jesus: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" (John 11:32). And some of the fellow-mourners said: "*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?*" They expected that He could have, and perhaps that made their grief more heartbreaking. Mary wept; the Jews with her were weeping; and Jesus, deeply moved by their grief, also wept.

That's a reminder that grief, mourning, and weeping at the death of a loved one is not something to be discouraged. It is not a sign of a lack of faith or a lack of hope. Such accusations are lobbed at Christians by unbelievers: "If you really believed, as you say, you wouldn't grieve." No, death is still a grim reality; it is still a signal of our broken world, and it is a time to grieve.

But ours is not a despairing grief, as St. Paul says, "*we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.*" We hope in Jesus; we hope in the Resurrection and Life; we hope in our own resurrection from death, as Paul continues: "*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep*" (1 Thess. 4:13-14). It's "the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Agenda*, p. 130) that we say as we commit the body of our loved one to its final resting place. Or as I will sometimes sing at the graveside as the body is being lowered into the ground: "Now lay we calmly in the grave This form whereof no doubt we have That it shall rise again one day In glorious triumph o'er decay" (ELHB 538:1). For ultimately, "*death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore*" (Rev. 21:4). For now, we hope in resurrection and life.

Jesus made His way to Lazarus' tomb. Much like Joseph's tomb where Jesus' dead body would soon be laid, the cave tomb had a stone rolled over the front. Jesus had them remove the stone, even though the odor of death would surely fill the air, they told Jesus — after all, Lazarus had been dead for four days.

The natural process of decay that turns dead flesh into dust would have long ago begun to do its destructive work. But that was no obstacle for Jesus. They did as He said. The "*glory of God*" would be manifest in God's Son. He prayed to the Father, but that was only so that the witnesses would come to believe in the only Son of God. It was by Jesus' own creative and recreative power that, at His Word — "*Lazarus, come out*" — the dead man came forth from the tomb still bound in the linen strips and cloth that covered him in death.

They unbound Lazarus and surely found no trace of death or decay in him. You can see, this miraculous restoration of life is not like what happens today on the

operating table when doctors may have to stop heart and lungs for a time to do a life-saving surgery. They have machines to do the work of pumping blood and oxygenating it, and of breathing in the interim, until the heart and lungs can be restarted. Although the heart is stopped, and the breathing is stopped, the patient is never really dead. But Lazarus was dead, and now was alive again, flesh restored.

Lazarus, though, would die again. His resurrection is not what will be for us on the Last Day. As St. Paul says, *“We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him”* (Rom. 6:9). And since *“we shall certainly be united with [Jesus] in a resurrection like his”* (Rom. 6:5), that’s the way it will be for us, too. We will be raised to eternal life, never to die again. Though we may be long dead, longer than four days, there will be a rattling on the Last Day, and our dry bones will come together, and our flesh turned to dust will be restored with sinew and flesh and skin that will come upon those bones and will cover our bodies, and breath will return to our dead bodies, and we will live.

And there will be no trace of death in our bodies, no trace of the corruption of sin in our bodies. Our lowly bodies will have been transformed into a glorious body (Phil. 1:21). The perishable will have put on the imperishable; the mortal will have put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:53). And we will live forever in the bliss of paradise.

Brothers and sisters, this is the fruit of what again this year we are about to embark upon, as we trace the steps of Jesus through suffering and death to resurrection. As Caiaphas the High Priest prophesied, *“Jesus would die for the nation, ... not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”* We also are those children of God for whom Jesus died. Therefore, may God grant us a blessed Holy Week and Easter festival, not despairing in Jesus’ death for us, but rejoicing in it and in His resurrection victory over it, which is also ours in Christ Jesus, and remembering the promise: *“He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die”* (LSB, p. 281).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.