

*In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Death is all around us. A lot more than we're used to. As this pandemic moves through the world, through our country and cities and communities, as "the curve" rises, we are being confronted with death more and more, on the news, on our social media feeds.

Death is something we generally try to avoid –

Americans spend billions of dollars trying to avoid, or at least delay death. And here we are, smack dab in the middle of death, even in our gospel reading.

You know how, in the movies, when the music starts to pick up in intensity – you know something BIG is about to happen.

The music has been picking up all of Lent in the gospel, a succession of encounters, growing in intensity and revelation. And it doesn't get much bigger than death. St. Paul called death the final enemy, the last thing to be brought under Christ's authority. So as Christians we have a different view of death.

We see it not as only as end of life, but as a beginning of Life.

And, as Jesus showed here, sometimes things have to be dead to receive life.

"Lord, if you had been here," says Martha when Jesus finally shows up.

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would still be alive," echoes her sister Mary.

They were not short on faith, these friends of Jesus. They knew he could do something. But even their faith could not have imagined what.

In fact by the time Jesus does come, four days late, they would rather he left well enough alone. "Lord, there will be an odor!" Martha says.

But Jesus was in control of the timing. He lingered where he was for two days after receiving the message that Lazarus was sick. He tells his confused disciples that *"Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."*

He knows what late looks like, and he also knows he is right on time.

Jesus has been demonstrating the power of God's Kingdom since the time he turned water into wine, through countless healings, multiplying of loaves and fish – now it is time for the penultimate demonstration of Kingdom power on earth.

Why? "So that you may believe." All the miracles have been for this:

"So that you may believe God sent me." So that we may believe, my friends.

And believe bigger than we ever thought possible.

Martha believed –s he gets straight As on the quiz Jesus sets her.

She is nothing but faith: *"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."*

That is pretty amazing faith in Christ's healing power. And she goes further:

*"But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."*

*Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."*

Martha knows the answer to that one; she's been listening:

*"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

And then Jesus says something utterly outrageous:

*"I am the resurrection and the life. I AM – consciously echoing God's name.*

*"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?"*

This is a very hard quiz! But Martha is right there,

one of the first of Jesus' apostles to recognize his true identity as Messiah:

*"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God,*

*who was to come into the world."*

But even Martha balks at putting this faith to the ultimate test.

When Jesus tells them to open the tomb, she protests. "It's too late for that now!"

But he knows what can happen. He cries out, "Lazarus, come out!"

And the poor man does, bound as he is.

But he comes out of that tomb, his flesh intact, to die again another day.

Lazarus is revived to this life. Jesus is resurrected for eternal life.

There is a difference.

But right here, at Lazarus' tomb, Jesus writes the death sentence on death itself.

Right here he says, "Look. There is good news here, even at the grave!

Look what God can do!"

It's not easy for us to see physical death as occasion for Good News, especially

when we see a gap between what God can do, and what God seems to do.

After all, the Christian story tells us that death came into the world only through the

disobedience of humankind, that garden story we heard the first Sunday in Lent.

We experience death as loss, untimely.

We can only see good news in death if we look at it from Jesus' perspective.

Mary, Martha – they could experience Lazarus' illness only as bad news.

Jesus did not hurry to Lazarus' side, because he knew what could be.

Can we, knowing what we know, by faith, begin to have that kind of vision?

We have that faith in nature. We see bare trees coming beginning to bud.

I have no doubt they will bud and leaf yet again. I have faith there.

I was once at a retreat where we had to find objects from nature  
and see how they spoke to us of God.

And I grabbed this little branch that was broken on both ends, about a foot long.

It had two little nubs on it that looked like once buds had been there.

And it spoke volumes to me: it was broken, but too strong for me to  
break it further. It was creation. It was the wood of the cross.

It was mystery covered in bark – I couldn't see its insides, only the outside.

Well, after the retreat I got it in my head to put this thing in water and see if those

nubs would generate leaves. My rector begged me not to – he thought I was  
going to be disappointed and lose my faith, because this branch was pretty dead!  
But I stuck it in a plastic water glass on my desk.

And after a few weeks, a tiny bit of green appeared on one of the nubs.

And then the nubs got bigger, and greener. And then a little tiny bit of a leaf  
appeared on one. In about three weeks, there were two clumps of leaves on that  
dead little branch, cut off as it was from its tree, dead as it had been.

I still think God did that to remind me that new life comes out of dead things.

This was in the year after my sister had died,  
and I'd had a setback in the ordination process.

I needed reminding. That branch spoke of God, and kept on speaking.

We have this kind of faith in nature. Why not in God, who has also

demonstrated to us time and again his power and faithfulness and love?

Can we trust God for new life when a job ends, a sale falls through,

when a marriage dies, when a lifelong dream seems never to come to pass?

Can we trust God for new life when we're hopeless and depressed, as dry as those  
bones in the desert that God blew new breath into in Ezekiel's vision?

Can we trust God even when the world over people are getting sick and dying,  
when humans find new and more horrific ways to destroy each other?

when our retirement funds take a nosedive, when we're stuck at home?

Is it sick to trust God for new life in the face of death?

No... but it sure is hard. Even Jesus felt it in his very guts, moved to his core.

We all want the Lazarus miracle, death delayed, death defied.

Yet God is in the business of bringing about much deeper life, which will not end.

Can we believe in life bigger than we ever thought possible?

Can we believe in this church filled with people brought back to life by God's spirit?

Lazarus was deader than dead. Four days rotting dead. And Jesus gave him life. Those bones in the desert were deader than dead – no flesh, no sinews, no breath. And the Spirit of God remade them and gave them new life – new life to a religious community that was all but dead after conquest and exile. Parts of you may feel deader than dead, lost, lonely, broken, demoralized. At times this community may feel deader than dead. But deader than dead is not a bad place for Christians to be.

Jesus was deader than dead after they nailed him to a cross and murdered him. He was sealed in a tomb, on the inside this time. Did death have the last word? Come back in two weeks and find out!

There's a great Easter hymn,  
that I promise we will sing when we come back together in church:

*Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain;  
Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain.  
Love lives again, that with the dead has been;  
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.*

*When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain  
Thy touch can call us back to life again.  
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:  
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.*

*Amen.*

**John 11:1-44**

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.

So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death.

No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, **he stayed where he was two more days.**

Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight?"

A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light.

It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

After he had said this, he went on to tell them,

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."

Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, **and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.** But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples,

"Let us also go, that we may die with him."

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "**if you had been here**, my brother would not have died.

But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

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 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?"

"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside.

"The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you."

When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.

Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, **if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**"

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, **he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.**

"Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

But some of them said,

"Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

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."

*It's no longer convenient to see your handiwork now. It's too late.*

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone.

Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, **Jesus called in a loud voice**, "Lazarus, come out!"

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."

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

**1** The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. **2** He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. **3** He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

**4** Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! **5** This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath [a] enter you, and you will come to life. **6** I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.' "

**7** So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. **8** I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

**9** Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.' " **10** So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

**11** Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' **12** Therefore prophecy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. **13** Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. **14** I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.' "