

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever gone face to face with death? By that I mean, have you ever been in a situation where your life or the life of someone very near and dear to you was truly in danger? If you haven't yet gone face to face with death, I'm guessing you are quite young. I bet we could all sit down and swap stories of going face to face with death. We could talk about times loved ones have face death... maybe they did die. Maybe they almost did. I bet we could also hear quite a few stories of when our own lives were in danger. A serious disease, a major surgery, a car accident.

Before we take a closer look at today's Gospel lesson, I want to give you two very good reasons to listen carefully to today's message.

- 1) This story takes place about a week before Jesus's death. When you see what happens in this story when Jesus comes face to face with death when his good friend Lazarus dies, it will give you a hint as to what will happen when he comes face to face with death himself.
- 2) When the day comes when we must stand face to face with death, we will have calm, a peace, a knowledge and a faith that will carry us through what will likely be the most difficult time of our life.

So, let's listen!

Again, the time is about a week before Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus gets word that his friend Lazarus was very sick. This is the brother of Mary and Martha. Whenever Jesus was in Jerusalem or the area, he would stay with them at their house in Bethany... it was only a couple miles from Jerusalem. They loved Jesus very much and Jesus loved them. They had heard the teachings of Jesus frequently and in great detail. They believed in Jesus as the promised Christ.

So when Jesus got news that Lazarus was very sick, this was sad news. But Jesus didn't go right away. He waited a couple days to begin the long journey to Bethany. By the time he got there it was "too late." Lazarus had already died. In fact, he was already on his fourth day in the grave.

Now we pick up the story:

John 11:17-27 On his arrival [in Bethany], 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. [So key facts you don't want to miss: 1) It's only a week or so before the crucifixion. 2) Bethany is near Jerusalem. 3) There are many, many people around, mourning the death of Lazarus. In other words, there would be *lots* of witnesses to the miracle that was about to occur.

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."

I think we often remember Martha from a different story when she was the one who was busy with preparations while her sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to his Word. But in this case, it's Martha that goes out to Jesus, and Martha who shows a remarkable faith in this circumstance. She goes out to meet Jesus. Mary stays home. And she says, "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" I can imagine Martha had been saying for days, "When

Jesus gets here, everything will be okay. When Jesus gets here, he'll heal Lazarus. Jesus is coming! Be patient! He'll make Lazarus all better! When Jesus gets here, my brother will no longer be sick." But day after day, Jesus didn't show up, and Lazarus kept getting worse. Jesus didn't arrive, and one day, Lazarus breathed his last. Her brother was dead. Jesus didn't make it. If only he had been there, this disaster would not have occurred. But now it's too late!

Martha was standing face to face with death. And looking at her brother's lifeless body, she said, "It's too late! Hope is now gone."

And yet Martha did not lose *all* hope, for her very next words to Jesus were: "**But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.**" Martha knew Jesus well. She knew the power of his Word. Whatever he asked the Father, the Father would do. She believed. She trusted Jesus. Do you see what Martha is doing here? Standing face to face with death, she's looking at one thing, then the other. She looks at death and she despairs. She looks at Jesus and she has hope. She looks at death and she despairs. She looks at Jesus and she has hope.

If you've ever faced death (your own or a loved one's) then you know exactly what Martha was going through, don't you. You see death before you and you grieve and despair. You turn to Jesus and you have hope and even joy. But your gaze keeps going back and forth.

In that moment when her gaze left death and was cast on Jesus, Jesus grabbed hold quick with these next words:

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha! Keep your eyes on me! (Jesus said.) Look at me! Listen to me very carefully, "Your brother will rise again.

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Wow! Martha grasped spiritual truths that I'm not sure Jesus' own disciples grasped. She knew and believed there would be a resurrection on the last day. Even in this time of sadness, she did know and believe there would be a future resurrection from the dead. That thought gave her comfort.

Again, Jesus grabs the opportunity to strengthen her faith. **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."** Jesus affirms and strengthens her confession. He says, "You're right that your brother will rise on the last day... and I will raise him!" When standing in face to face with death, Jesus says to Martha, "I am bigger than death. I stand closer than death. I am the resurrection and the life. Believe in me!"

Jesus asked Martha: "**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."**

Would you do something for me? Kick the image out of your head of Martha busy, busy, no time for the word of God. That was just an isolated incident and was not characteristic of this woman who obviously had great faith. Instead, remember her as the woman who truly understood Jesus and trusted in him for eternal life. She is able to explain and articulate here truths the disciples just didn't get. She believes Jesus is the Christ (the promised Savior!), the Son of God (not just a prophet)!

So look what has happened here! Martha is wavering! Her eyes look at death and she despairs. It's too late! Nothing can be done. Her eyes look to Jesus, and she has faith and hope. And Jesus catches that glance of faith and reinforces it and strengthens it and reaffirms it. The hope she has is real. She didn't misunderstand. He is the resurrection and the life! Keep your eyes on him.

Having strengthened her faith with his Word and promises, Jesus now demonstrates her faith is not in vain with his actions:

John 11:38-45 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. This is how they buried the dead there. The rock was to protect the body from wild animals.

“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.” The Egyptians were master embalmers. The Jewish people of that day were not. They wrapped the body in some spices to mask the odor, but it didn’t slow decay. Starting on the third day, the look and smell of decay becomes evident. This was the fourth day. Martha reminds Jesus of this! The odor might be overpowering.

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.”

Jesus makes it very clear... what was about to happen was to the glory of God. He wants everyone present to know the miracle taking place and whom they should glorify.

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.” Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.

Jesus affirms Martha’s faith and demonstrates to all present his power over death. Jesus affirms our faith in him today also!

At the beginning of the sermon, I said told you there were two valuable things we’d learn from this lesson today. The first one is this: keep today’s story about Jesus and the resurrection of Lazarus in the front of your mind as we remember the last week of Jesus’ life... starting next week. We will meet for worship at 7pm on that Thursday (not this week but next) and remember the night Jesus was betrayed... the night he instituted the Lord’s Supper... the night Jesus was taken captive. The next evening at 7pm we have a worship service remembering the crucifixion and death of Lord Jesus Christ. In short, we’re going to be closely following our Savior as he comes face to face with death himself. In those special services, will you make an effort to remember what we heard today?

This Jesus who is going face to face with death is the same one who faced the death of his friend just a week earlier... and came out the victor. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is all powerful. If Jesus is being arrested, mocked, abused and crucified, you can be certain of this: He is facing death only because he *wants* to. He’s doing it because he *needs* to. If we had the power to walk away from death, you better believe we would use that power! The raising of Lazarus proves that Jesus *did* have that power, but chose not to walk away from death. He faced it!

He faced it to defeat it.

Look at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and you see how dreadful it was to stand face to face with death. But Jesus willingly took the cup of suffering and death which the Father had in mind. And because Jesus willingly, intentionally went the way of the cross, this changes everything for us. We deserve death for our sins. But God in his love and mercy passed that death sentence on to his Son Jesus. Jesus took our disobedience and wrongs upon himself and he faced the wrath of God for us... in our place.

He proved his power of death by conquering it himself. On the third day he rose again... a glorious event we’ll celebrate here in two weeks. So keep in mind the whole time: Jesus as he faces death, does so willingly and intentionally for you and for me!

And this means, when we face death (our own or a loved one’s) we really do have the evidence that proves Jesus conquers death. He is the resurrection and the life.

As you stand face to face with death, the closer it comes, the more you will be tempted to stare into the ugly face of death and despair. Death is calling for your attention and hopelessness with it. But hear the Lord Jesus calling you to turn your gaze to him! Hear him say to you, “Don’t

despair! **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?"**

You do, don't you? Our hearts cry out together! Yes, Lord, we believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world."

May this be your comfort and peace when someday you stand face to face with death. Know that Jesus defeated death. When you're looking at death, you're looking at the face of a loser! The empty cross and open grave prove it. Look at Jesus, and believe! Amen.