

LIFE IN CHRIST

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 21 “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” 23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

24 Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” 25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” 27 “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39 “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.” 40 Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 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.” 43 When he had said this, 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.” 45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

What grip cannot be broken? What force cannot be undone by any amount of human ingenuity? Is it not death? A grave does not need to be marked or remembered to retain its power. The grave does not release its grip. What is more powerful than death?

Grief is a human experience that we all undergo, eventually. To lose someone who is still young is especially difficult, whether they are a friend, a spouse, a parent. The grief of a parent who loses a child is especially difficult. And with these we must also include the death of a sibling. Martha of Bethany had lost her brother, and we have reason to suspect that the three siblings, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, were not very old, perhaps younger than Jesus who was by now close to his 33rd birthday. As Martha stood in the receiving line at the cemetery at Bethany she was inundated by the wailing of mourners (which was the custom in their time) and the greetings and sympathies of friends, which is something we still do to this day.

I suppose that Martha was still in the “fog” that I have experienced during periods of mourning in my lifetime, those days immediately following a loved one’s death when day to day tasks are done, but nothing is remembered. We can well imagine friend upon friend walking up to Martha and her sister, saying “My sympathy,” “My condolences,” and many similar things. These things

went on for a week in those days, as people heard the news and made the trip to see the family. And then, on the fourth day of the funeral receiving line, Martha was told: **“Jesus is coming.”**

She went out, probably up the little path that led over the crest of the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem, and sure enough, there were Jesus and the disciples.

Martha had changed since an earlier encounter. She was no longer the one to stay behind. This time it was Mary who stayed home and took care of things and Martha who went out to see Jesus and to talk with him. And Jesus did not waste any of their precious time. **“Your brother will rise again,”** he said. And Martha knew. Martha believed in the resurrection, that was proclaimed in the Old Testament Scriptures. **“I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the Last Day.”**

The Scriptures that announced this included of course **Job 19:26**, **“I know that my redeemer lives... and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.”** And there is **Isaiah 26:19**, **“Your dead will live, their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy!”** And there is **Ezekiel 37** and the account of the Valley of the Dry Bones, and **Daniel 12:2**, **“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, other to shame and everlasting contempt.”**

Of course, it's that last passage, Daniel's proclamation that the resurrection for some is to heaven and for all others is to hell, that makes people pause. This is our problem: Death is the result of sin, and the equation is so very simple. We all sin, we all will die. And if that were the end of it, we would all see death as nothing but a conclusion and a release from suffering and uncertainty, that would sometimes be a tragedy-- such as for one as young as Lazarus.

But the Bible also proclaims the judgment of hell after death, and what can man do about that but be afraid and be uncertain and make up stories that don't really help or pretend that if science has no proof of hell, that hell doesn't exist-- like an astronomer who claims that **“No more stars or planets will ever be found because I have not seen them personally.”**

And then Jesus tells Martha, **I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even if he dies. And who ever lives and believes in me will never die.**

Let's think with Martha about this. She believed in the resurrection. She believed that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Savior. But what is stronger than death?

And everything changed. There is Jesus walking up to the tomb and barking out commands while Martha is still trying to work it all out. He calls out: **“Take away the stone!”** And after a pitiful objection about the smell of decay, Jesus told her what was happening: **“Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”** Jesus gave all credit to what he was about to do to the Father, and he said three words: **LAZARE, DEURO EXO!** And Lazarus came out, still bound by his graveclothes, but alive, and reunited with his sisters. And as his wrapping all unraveled and his graveclothes fell away, all their misunderstandings became unraveled and all their doubts fell away: There stood the truth. Lazarus is alive!

In John's Gospel, there are three great miracles that take place in or near Jerusalem. The first was the healing of the man who had been an invalid for 38 years, the healing at the pool of Bethesda in John 5. The second was the healing of the blind man right in the temple in John chapter 9.

There were certainly reports or rumors of Jesus doing even more in Galilee, in the Decapolis, up near the border of Lebanon. Some said he had raised a girl in one town, and a boy in another. To the people of Jerusalem, they could treat these reports as exaggeration, perhaps, or just stories. But this, raising of Lazarus from the dead within walking distance of Jerusalem-- and a man like Lazarus who was so obviously well known to the people of city! John tells us that many of the Jews who had come to visit the sisters saw this and became believers; they put their faith in Jesus. But for others, it was the last straw. They started plotting how to kill Jesus, and even how to kill Lazarus, too.

Here was one single miracle that answered every question anyone might have about Jesus. He is powerful, he has God on his side, his miracles are true, and he has power even over death, and who or what could ever be stronger than death?

The only answer is Jesus our Savior, whose own resurrection from the dead means our own resurrection from the dead. **On the last day, the same body that a person had here on earth and that was parted from the soul by death, laid in the grave, and destroyed by decomposition, will be made alive again by the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the resurrection of the dead, and the crowning work of salvation by Jesus for our sakes.**^a Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Jesus is the resurrection: the release from death and the grave. But that girl up in Galilee? The daughter of Jairus? She died again, later on. The boy? The young man from Nain? He died once again. And Lazarus here in Bethany? There would be a second funeral down the road for him, too. They were raised from the dead to show us that when God says we will rise, that it will be with our real bodies, these bodies, that we will rise. But their families did not have them back forever-- only for the rest of a natural lifetime.

But Jesus doesn't only say that he is the **Resurrection**. He has power over the powerful grave, but he also has power that overcomes the power of death, and even the permanence of death. Jesus is also the **Life**. This life after we rise from the dead means that we will never die, ever again. We will have release from death, from the prison sentence of hell, release even from the devil's power to tempt us. There will be no more guilt, no more shame, no more regret, no more fear or grief or loneliness.

You are so dearly beloved by your Savior that he will raise you, personally, on the Last Day, and bring you home to be with him forever.

What is more powerful than death? It is Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life.

^a Hoenecke, Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics Vol IV, p. 253.