



Saints' Triumphant -- November 3-5, 2024

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: What Do You Want on Your Tombstone?

1. Plan for death 2. Prepare for Life

Sermon Text: John 11: 32-44

***<sup>32</sup> 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." <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. <sup>34</sup> "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. <sup>35</sup> Jesus wept. <sup>36</sup> Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead <sup>38</sup> Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. <sup>39</sup> "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." <sup>40</sup> Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup> 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." <sup>43</sup> When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" <sup>44</sup> 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." John 11: 32-44***

Dear Friends of Jesus,

Picture the following scene: with the condemned man's back against the wall in a Mexican prison, he's offered a blindfold with sharpshooters standing at attention. With the sharpshooters taking careful aim, the commander marches forward and asks: "What do you want on your tombstone?" The man peers from beneath his blindfold and says with a stunning answer: "Pepperoni and cheese." Maybe you remember that tv commercial for Tombstone Pizza? Only if it were that easy to get out of a death-defying situation.

Today, at this All-Saints service, we're focused on a subject that strikes fear in the heart of most people: and that's the subject of death. If you really want to "kill" a conversation at work, among friends or at a party, just ask this question: "So what do you believe happens when you die?" So why is death such a feared subject? Just think about it: our world does everything it can to ignore the reality of death or at least cover it up. People don't die – we say: "they pass on, they expire, they move on." And when a death happens, we tend to quickly hide the body in the basement of a morgue or funeral home. Why is that? That's because death is scary. And death hurts, even for the Christian. It involves grief, loss, and separation. So, we can't deny or escape it. On the other hand, psychologists tell us that it's unhealthy to obsess about death: to replay it in our minds over and over again. But, it is important to face the reality of death every

so often as it puts everything in perspective. Statistics tell us that 32% of Americans have a written will. 67% of Americans are likely to vote in this year's presidential election. But 100% of Americans will die, So that last stat certainly includes you and me. So don't obsess over it, but to use a travel illustration: "always keep your bags packed." In other words, recognize that death can come anytime. And be ready at any moment. Be ready with Jesus as Your Savior.

So what will your tombstone say? How will you be remembered by your children and grandchildren, your family and community? Sobering questions? Do you want your tombstone to say: "He made a lot of cash." Or "She really liked to have fun?" There's something missing. So what Do You Want on Your Tombstone? I'd like to suggest that we claim the same epitaph that was given to a dead man named Lazarus in our sermon reading. His read: "loved by the LORD." So at this All Saints service, let's answer the question: "What do you want on your tombstone?" We'll answer that burning question like the people did at Lazarus' funeral in John chapter 11. And as we do, we'll first of all plan for death. And then, we'll prepare for life..

Come with me to a funeral just outside the big city of Jerusalem to the small village of Bethany. It's the funeral of a man named Lazarus with sisters Mary and Martha standing by. Don't worry, we're not too late. After all, Jesus just arrived and Lazarus had been dead for four days. These sisters teach us how to plan for death. Listen as our sermon begins: **32 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."** Ouch – hard words to hear. But, you know what: she's right. Jesus, the Son of God who is almighty could've prevented this. Yet even in her grief, Mary still expressed her God-given faith that Jesus has unlimited power, that He can fix any problem – He even has power over the final enemy of death. It was an emotional roller-coaster for these sisters: seeing your brother die and there's not a single thing you can do about it. But, instead of running away from Jesus in anger, Mary humbly ran to Him in faith. Great move, Mary, we'd say. It's a move we need to remember to make when we experience personal loss – whether it's someone we barely know, or someone we've lived with every day. We prepare for death by running to Jesus day after day, especially when the pain of loss is at its worst.

And when we run to Jesus, we discover another side of Jesus that just might surprise us, a side that's an eternal gamechanger. **33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 34"Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. 35Jesus wept. 36Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"** What side of Jesus is John describing here? Isn't this a picture of His human side? Besides being the Son of God, Jesus is also equally our human brother. He knows what pain feels like: the pain of being nailed to a cross to suffer for sins He didn't commit, and now the pain of seeing Mary and Martha grieve. It tore Him apart – so Jesus did a very human thing. He wept. He wept because He cares for people. And that gets to heart of Jesus that helps us plan for

death. Jesus wept because he wasn't only thinking of Lazarus and what death did to this family. He was thinking about what death does to us – it hurts more than words can say. But, it will truly help us to plan for death by realizing that we too will die. Don't just realize that death is a possibility. Plan on it. Think about how many medical advances God has given us: the polio vaccine, heart transplants, even cancer treatments. But, at best, death can only be staved off. There will never be a human invention that will ever prevent it. And here's why: all people die because all people sin. The Bible says in Romans 6:23: ***The wages of sin is death.*** But the Bible isn't just talking about physical death, but eternal death we all deserve because of this disease called sin. God didn't design people to die but to live. But, ever since Adam & Eve passed down their sin, we too inherit that sin, sin that is damning. That's not good news, but it is news we need to hear so we can properly prepare. Lazarus did. You know, when you think about it, there's very little we know about Lazarus. In fact, there's not even one word or deed of Lazarus recorded in Holy Scripture, except one fact: He was loved by the LORD. Why was he loved? Good question. Not because he deserved or earned it. It was only because of God's grace in Jesus who took the sins of Lazarus, of you and me upon himself at the cross and paid for them in full by his death and resurrection.

So plan for death. It's going to happen. Have you pre-planned your funeral? Sounds like a dark, morbid thing, but it's actually a loving thing for those you leave behind: pick out the hymns, the readings, even your casket while you are still living. Less than 20% of the population pre-plans their funerals. It sounds like a silly thing to do, until you're faced with it. But, my friends, do more than just pre-plan for death. Prepare for life. Satan tries to freeze us every time we think about death. So don't let Him. Be reminded that just as Jesus was with the sisters during their time of grief, He will be with us and those we love. We are never alone. Planning for death also means we prepare for life. Realizing this life is temporary will help us be wiser stewards of our blessings. The clock is ticking. So what do you want on your tombstone?

Let's return to the funeral of Lazarus. The Scriptures say: ***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 believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone.*** It might seem odd to prepare for life by planning for death. But, look at Martha. Jesus helped her face death by attending the funeral of her brother. And death sure isn't pretty – Martha said so (as I quote from the King James translation): "LORD He stinketh." Back in Jesus' day, bodies were often buried in rock caves cut into the side of hills. The stone prevented grave robbers from stealing valuables and provided a crude seal to prevent the decaying body from smelling. So how did Martha plan for life? She obeyed her LORD. Against all reason, the stone was rolled away from the grave. Jesus said it: Martha believed it – it was that simple. Despite every bone in our body that might tell us to do the opposite, we prepare for life by carefully listening to Jesus' words: to stay close to His Word each week; and to gratefully serve Him with the short time we have left, to love others as He has loved us. We need to prepare for this life by realizing that

Jesus has eternal life waiting for us. When we die, it's not over. Death is not the end, but for the Christian, and the Christian only, it's the door to experience eternal life in heaven. That's truly living: to know for certainty God has eternal life prepared for us. And we need to know that right now.

Our sermon reading concludes: **43When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44The 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."** Do you know why Jesus used the name: "Lazarus" when he called out to the graveyard? If Jesus hadn't used the name "Lazarus," the entire graveyard of Bethany would've come out to meet Jesus. This was more than just a good man or a great philosopher, this miracle proved that Jesus is the promised Savior. I wonder how Lazarus felt about coming back to earth. Can't you see him in heaven, enjoying perfection, being reunited with all the believers of history, seeing his family and friends again? Suddenly his shoulder is tapped, and he's told: "The LORD needs you." "Of course, LORD", he says. And then he asks: "The LORD wants me to go where?" But, this 7<sup>th</sup> miracle recorded by the Gospel writer John brings real comfort and hope to future generations. If Jesus could raise Lazarus, He will raise every Christian believer. And dealing with death makes it easier for us to handle life. With this miracle, Jesus releases us from the fear of death like Lazarus was released from His grave clothes. God has us here on earth for a purpose: to share His saving name with others. We never know how much time we have, but we want to be ready for life with Jesus: planning for the worst, expecting the best, and taking what comes.

I don't know what kind of music you like to listen to, but I'd like to tell you about a song, country music star Tim McGraw sang. It's called: "Live Like You Were Dying". In a tribute to his father, former pro baseball pitcher Tug McGraw who died of brain cancer, this song depicts a dad giving his son advice when he finds out that he doesn't have much time left. Instead of throwing in the towel, this dad says that he has read the Bible and now has a brand new philosophy on life: *To Live Like You Were Dying*. As Christians, we know why. Because Jesus has saved us, we too can live like we were dying because we are. But, before we experience heaven along with Lazarus, may God use each one of us now to reach one more person with the love of Christ. What do you want on your tombstone? Simply this: we're loved by the LORD. And it doesn't get any better than that. Amen.