

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 29, 2020
John 11:17-27, 38-53

“Deliver Us, Jesus, from Unbelief”

Today, we get a foretaste of Easter as Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. In the midst of so much distress and anxiety with the coronavirus, with increasing numbers of people diagnosed with this here at home and around the world, with the restrictions and closures that are the new normal in daily life, there is good news in today’s Gospel lesson. We see that even death itself is subject to Jesus. Governor Northam’s Executive Order 53 has banned all gatherings of more than ten people through April 23, which means that public worship services will also continue to be suspended until at least that date. Two weeks from today is Easter Sunday on April 12, and from all indicators, our celebration of Jesus’ resurrection will be very different this year; not at all what we are used to or what we would like. But the good news of Jesus’ victory over death and the grave is not dependent on outward circumstances. If anything, we may well grow in deeper appreciation and thankfulness for all that Jesus has done because of these outward circumstances. The truth is that in spite of all our modern-day advances in medicine, science, and technology, we are vulnerable and fragile. Life is uncertain. That is one of the lessons to be learned from this time of the coronavirus. We have so many questions right now: How did this happen? Why do some become ill, but not others? When will there be a cure? What will the future look like? We don’t always understand why loved ones become sick. Like Lazarus, we face the stark reality of our own mortality. Like Mary and Martha, when death happens we grieve the loss of those who are close to us. In the midst of all the questions, in the midst of our own mortality and grief, we look to Jesus who is risen from the dead, who lives and reigns to all eternity. And so we pray, “Deliver us, Jesus. Deliver us not only from the coronavirus, not only from sickness and death, but deliver us from unbelief.” That is the theme for the message this day: “Deliver Us, Jesus, from Unbelief.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

I encourage you, after this time of worship, to go back and read through all of John 11. This provides the full context for today’s Gospel lesson, which is only a portion of this chapter. It would be very easy to retitle today’s message, “Deliver Us, Jesus, from Death,” but we’ll save that for Easter Sunday. Strangely enough, the real focus today is not so much about death, but about belief vs. unbelief. Even though Jesus did indeed raise Lazarus from the dead, again and again in today’s Gospel lesson, what comes up here is belief vs. unbelief (John 11:25, 26, 27, 40, 42, 45, 48). To believe is to trust, even when all signs indicate otherwise. And it is summed up in Jesus’ question to Martha: **“Do you believe this?”** (John 11:26). Before asking this question, Jesus revealed that he himself is the resurrection and the life, and that whoever believes in him, even though he die, shall yet live, and that everyone who lives and believes in him shall never die. Those are very big and bold claims! It would be very easy to be skeptical about Jesus’ claims; to distrust and disbelieve. But what is our alternative? Is there really a second choice here? As we are finding out, when everything is stripped away in life, what is left? It’s like Peter said to Jesus: **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God”** (John 6:68-69). Deliver us, Jesus, from unbelief!

We live in a particular time when it’s hard to know what to believe. Even apart from the coronavirus, there is often conflicting information over just about everything in life. Depending on what news source you are using, one report says this and another says that, depending on what spin you put on it. There is confusion and division among people. One group of people believes this, and another group of people believes that. Each group believes the other is completely misinformed and misled by the “other” news source. The result is suspicion, mistrust, and disbelief. Where is the truth? Who or what can we believe?

Without question, we are being humbled by what is happening around us. Our lives have been disrupted in ways that just a few months ago, even a few weeks ago, we could not have imagined. We realize on a whole different level how much of life is out of our control. That's what it feels like when we lose a loved one. We feel like not only has life been disrupted, it's been torn apart. When a loved one dies, we know first-hand how very little we control in life. In the midst of these feelings of grief and loss, we have a Savior who knows what it is like to lose someone close. In fact, the shortest verse in all of Scripture is here in John 11: **"Jesus wept"** (John 11:35). We have a Savior who wept. More than this, we have a Savior who went to the cross and shed his blood for you and for me. As Caiaphas unwittingly prophesied of Jesus that **"... it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish"** (John 11:50). And that is exactly what Jesus did do: he died for the people – for you and me – on the tree of the cross that we might not die eternally. He died for us so that **"whoever believes in [him], though he die, yet shall he live"** (John 11:25). Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, every Sunday is a celebration of Christ's resurrection and new life. Every Sunday, even in Lent, is a mini-Easter. **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"** (Romans 8:1).

When Christ's people are planning funeral services for loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus, they often choose this account of Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead as one of the Scripture lessons to be read. It is often said that funerals are not so much for the dead as they are for the living, and there is great truth in that. Because of our faith in Jesus, we believe that our loved ones who have died in the Lord are already in God's care. It is those who remain who need the reminder that God cares for them as well. That question which Jesus asked Martha is asked of each one of us: **"Do you believe this?"** (John 11:26b). That is the question that makes an eternal difference. No one can answer that for us. Jesus came to bring new life not only to Lazarus, but to Mary and Martha, and to all of us. That valley of dry bones which Ezekiel saw (Ezekiel 37:1-14) can be revived and life restored; nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37). Sometimes that is how we feel on our life's journey: parched and lifeless. Maybe that is how you are feeling right now because of all that is happening with the coronavirus. But that same Spirit who breathed into those lifeless bones in Ezekiel's vision is more than able to breathe new life into us today. The closing verse of today's Epistle lesson tells us: **"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you"** (Romans 8:11). That's a powerful promise that speaks of life not only now in this present life, but life eternal that even death cannot touch. Hold onto that promise now during this season of Lent in this time of the coronavirus.

Thanks be to God that Jesus has delivered us from unbelief. Amen.