

The 5th Sunday in Lent: Holy Trinity Church: April 2, 2017

John 11: 1-45: *Let Jesus Free You From The Prison of your Fears!*

Preached

By

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

When the famous agnostic, Robert Ingersoll, died, his funeral leaflet had this solemn instruction. "There will be no singing." For without faith, few feel like singing in the face of death. Running perhaps, crying certainly, but not singing. Not in the face of death. For without faith, death steals our reason to sing. Death takes the song off our lips and leaves in its place stilled tongues and tear-stained cheeks.

My brothers and sisters, that is so true, not only because we have experienced it, but also because we see it happening in the gospel reading today from John 11. There was no singing at the funeral of Lazarus in Bethany, only mourning and weeping. Only wailing and crying, but no singing. The home of Mary and Martha was more like a prison than a home. People shuffled about aimlessly,

their faces downcast, their eyes dulled by death. On their lips was no music or laughter, only the grief that reminded them of their loss. Another prisoner of sickness had been visited by the jailer of death. Another person caught in death's icy grip had been taken from them. Lazarus was dead. Another loved one was gone.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, the fear of death has filled thousands of prisons. You can't see the walls. You can't see the warden. You can't hear the heavy doors slam behind you as you enter its' cells. You can't even see the locks, but you can see the prisoners. You can see them every day around us as they slip their way through this life, hoarding all they can get for themselves, grasping for power and looking for meaning in things that are dead, people imprisoned by fear and hiding from life, each under the same sentence, each under the same fate. They live as though there is no life after death. They live as though there was no Heaven. They live as though the promises of Jesus Christ are a pack of lies.

My brothers and sisters, we know death is like a ball and chain tied to our leg. We can try to run from it, but we can't. Its weight is too heavy. It slows us down. We can try to pick it up and carry it with us, but we cannot go far. Its burden is too great. We can try to ignore it, but it always drags us down. It

may be a sudden sickness or the death of a loved one. It may be the doctor's diagnosis or the pathology report or the CAT-scan's result. Whatever it is, it reminds us that we are all under the same sentence of death.

Mary and Martha faced death that day. Their brother, Lazarus, had been seriously ill. They were three of Jesus' closest friends, so they sent for him. They had witnessed Jesus healing power. They felt their brother would be in no danger if Jesus were near, so they called for him. We can appreciate those feelings, can't we? Who hasn't called upon the Lord in time of trouble? Who hasn't thought, "If only God would help?" But Jesus didn't come in time. In fact, by the time he made it to Bethany, Lazarus had been in the grave four days. Martha was wondering what kind of friend was Jesus. She had heard he was approaching town, so she stormed out to meet him. "Lord, if you had only been here." If you had only come sooner, "my brother would not have died." There is hurt in those words. There is hurt and deep disappointment. The one person who could have made a difference, didn't, and Martha wants to know why. And you know what my sisters and brothers, so do we. Perhaps we have done what Martha did. Perhaps, we called upon the Lord and sought out healing for a loved one. Perhaps, we asked God for help and looked for Jesus to come. We can almost hear Martha, can't we? Surely he will come, surely he will help. Didn't he heal the paralytic? Didn't he cure the leper? Didn't he give

sight to the blind man and help the lame? And they hardly knew him. Surely he will come for Lazarus. Surely he will help us.

But Jesus didn't come. Jesus didn't help. Lazarus got worse and Martha was left to watch and wait. And when Lazarus slipped into unconsciousness, getting weaker and worse, Martha whispered in his ear, "Hold on Lazarus. Hold on my brother. Jesus will come. He will be here soon." But Jesus didn't come. He didn't help. And finally it was done. Lazarus died and four days later, Jesus came. And Martha is hurt and disappointed and I say rightfully so. And we know how she felt, for her words are our words. They have been echoed in the minds of countless numbers of people as they make their way to the graveside. "If only you had been here. If only you had helped my brother, my husband, my wife, my child, would have gotten well. They would not have died. If you were doing your part, God, none of this would have happened. If you were doing your part, Lord, we wouldn't be hurting like this."

Like the story today of Mary and Martha, the grave unearths our view of God and death. You see my brothers and sisters in Christ, death forces us to look deep within ourselves. When we come face to face with death, our view of God is challenged and we are forced to examine our faith. When we face death, we are forced to ask, "Where is God?" And yet, why do we think that when a

person is not healed, that God is not near? Why do we interpret the presence of death with the absence of God? Because that is how we think. As a result, when God doesn't answer our prayers for healing, we think God is not near. As a result, when we experience death and sadness, we think that God doesn't care. And that isn't true. Listen to Jesus' conversation with Martha. As Martha rushes out to see Jesus, she says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask." And Jesus says to her, "Your brother will rise again." She thinks Jesus is talking about the resurrection on the last day. So Jesus has to clarify for her. He says, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." For death has never stood in the way of God. God is present especially in the presence of death. Standing there before the grave of Lazarus, Jesus wept. He shed tears of sadness for the pain that Mary and Martha felt and he weeps tears for every family who has ever stood at the grave of a loved one.

My brothers and sisters, our challenge this week is to dare to believe in our eternal life. Our challenge this week is to dare to believe in a very real place called Heaven. Our challenge this week is to dare to throw off the imprisonment of fear, guilt and shame. Our challenge this week is to dare to

believe that you will not die all alone in your own arms. Our challenge this week is to allow Jesus to free you, to unbind you and to let you go from the prison of your deepest, darkest fears.

My prayer for all of you today is that you take these powerful words of hope spoken by our Savior Jesus and you hold onto them tightly. The final test of that hope is our own death. What gives death its' real sting is not just the anticipation of our heart and brain ceasing to function. It is the ending of our relationships, our endeavors, our activities, our dreams and our faithful striving that belongs to our living. In the words of Psalm 103, *“Our days are like the grass, we flourish like a flower in the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone, and its place shall know it no more.”* It is the melancholy fear that when our life ends, *“its place knows it no more.”*

Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead takes that melancholy fear and puts it out of the central place in our lives. God does not forget God's sons and daughters, and even though our great-grandchildren will know little or nothing about us, and what we lived for, that does not matter. The place where we shall be is the place where Jesus Christ is present, and all our potential, all our sanctified hopes and dreams will be fulfilled in so great a

measure that we have no words to describe it. Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard what good things God has prepared for those who love Him.

Our Christian hope makes it possible for us to look beyond the fulfillment of our constant worldly needs, wishes and desires and offers up to us a vision beyond suffering here on earth and beyond our death and that vision is of a very real place called Heaven.

About three years ago, I was sitting at the dining room table of a very young woman named Michelle who was dying of brain cancer. She had two young sons and a devoted husband and family. With tears in her eyes, she asked me this question, “Fr. John, do you think I am going to Heaven? I don’t know if I am going to Heaven.” I said to Michelle and I will say it to all of you. Don’t be scared. Don’t be afraid. Let not your hearts be troubled. You are going to Heaven. God loves you beyond your wildest imagination and God’s Son Jesus has already prepared a place for you there, and not just any place, the scriptures say a mansion, for the sons and daughters He loves so very much. With great faith, I know that when we look upon the face of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ He will stand there with his arms wide open with a big smile on his face. With great faith, I know that we will stand there with our arms wide open and with a big smile on our faces, and then our souls, our holy spirit, will simply roll into Jesus arms, and in that loving embrace, the Son of

God will say to us, “Well done my good and faithful daughter. Well done my good and faithful son. Welcome to my home and to your home.” Amen.