



Fifth Sunday in Lent
22 March 2026

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

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

I have decided, it does not make it any easier. I have read these words at bedside and over casket. “Lord, 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.” 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.” In this very place, I have shared these words, looking into the eyes of a wife or husband, son or daughter, and in some of the most difficult moments – the eyes of a mother and father. To speak a word of hope is to claim the pain of the cross and the promise of an empty tomb, and still, it does not make it any easier. Resurrection is only a dream in the deep well of despair.

And before we decide this is simply the dress rehearsal for what is to come in the days ahead, take hold of the moment we witness this day. Lazarus – a brother, provider, and friend is dead. We are not so far from recognizing our own Lazarus. Who, in your life, do you grieve the most? Who, in their absence, still causes you to pause in your day? And if loved ones are long present in the Kingdom of God, so much so, that you do not grieve them but only celebrate the reunion to come – tell me, my friends, what is your Lazarus today? I confess I wanted something more today. I know the story of this dead man returned to life. It brings me joy – as it always does. “The dead are raised.” I remember the moment John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to look for another?” And Jesus in reply “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” And I remember Jesus making that promise in a synagogue what seems like, forever ago. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

To set the oppressed free. How easy it is for us to hear those words and go on our way – be about our business without a second thought. And yet, this is what I believe God invites us to hear this day. Not the oppression of Rome, of one empire or another, but the oppression that consumes you in your anger or pain. The oppression that engulfs you in hatred or mistrust. For some of us, the Lazarus we need Jesus to raise is the one person we miss more than anyone else. For the rest of us, I wonder, if the Lazarus we need Jesus to raise, is the deep pain we suffer for a sacred trust shattered, or some other suffering known only to a few or maybe, known only to God. Does that change this story for you today? No longer a dress rehearsal for Easter celebrations, this resurrection story carries a glimmer of light so deep into our darkness that we hardly thought to believe that we would ever know peace or freedom or love or life itself every again.

We deal in death, in pain and darkness. That is what it is at times to be human. Today, it is death in Gaza and Iran. In earlier days it could have been a parade on Main Street; a school in Columbine; twin towers in New York City; a village in Vietnam or Korea; a harbor in Hawaii. We deal with the loss of those we love, and the pain of dreams unrealized, promises broken. We deal with disappointment and disaster as if they are old friends who visit too often. We believe in the power of the resurrection, but we deal with the tangible and bitter taste of defeat. We live within the limits of what it is to be human and the pain and death, seems to overwhelm us at times. We look for just a little bit of light to shine on our roughed-up hearts and offer us some peace in the midst of the storms—calm in the midst of the chaos. That’s all we want at times. Just a breather—a moment to gather ourselves up and step forward before we are hit in the face by the next struggle in our lives. That’s all Mary and Martha wanted. In the midst of their pain, they wanted to see Jesus. They wanted just a moment with their Savior as their brother was dying. Some words of peace or at the farthest hope a miracle. We look for them, especially, in the lowest valley of our pain. Come on God—just one little miracle. A blink of your eye can change everything. Just will it to be done and it will be. From death you bring life O God. From the grave you are able to call us back to life. That is all we want. It is not so much to ask. Just open his eyes, breathe life back



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into his lungs, and let his heart beat with the rhythm of your power—with the life that gushes from your open hand. And yet there is nothing.

We come to this time each year. In truth, twice a year. No, not the raising of Lazarus, but the gift of conversation with those considering becoming members of this community of faith – preparing to call Ascension their spiritual home. I never tire of the conversations. Sometimes there are visitors who are well prepared – ready to commit – jumping in with both feet. They are well-versed in this Lutheran flavor of Christianity – they know death and resurrection and can easily share the power of God’s grace in their own lives. Others are more tentative; they come with hesitation – often because they have been wounded in another spiritual home. There are questions asked. Answers are honest and plentiful. Guarantees, not so much. But the welcome of this place is always offered. In the past year, on more than one occasion, someone has asked a question about our non-negotiables – at least as far as your pastors are concerned. First, that hospitality is paramount in all that we do. (If anyone of us can feel at home here – than why not all of us.) Second, that the welcome of this place, is on behalf of God, and not on behalf of anyone of us. (If God would welcome me, God will certainly welcome you.) Third, that we are one congregation that worships in two languages. (There are plenty of congregations worshipping only in English in steep decline – let me know if you need a list.) And fourth, never will a young parent be stared at for a loud child choosing to praise God in their own way and time. (Ascension is who it is because of the noise of children among us – thanks be to God!) All that being said, those who are considering becoming members of this community are hungry for many things – but in so many cases – their hunger is the same as most of us – if not all of us – the good news...that we are loved. Even if there are times when the interference of the noise around us makes it difficult to hear the One who calls us by name.

When they arrive at the tomb, Jesus tells them to “take away the stone.” And Martha, says to Jesus, “Lord, already there is a stench.” Jesus says to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” And then we hear the voice of the One who is who he says he is – the resurrection and the life – cry out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” You can almost imagine Martha and Mary as their eyes bug out of their heads. “What did he say?” One might lean over to the other. “Did he just yell at our brother to come out of the tomb?” No, we heard him wrong.” But then into the light of day the first bandaged foot carefully steps and Mary and Martha rush to the side of their brother, who, once dead now stands alive. It is a miracle! Not just a healing, not a blind man seeing, or a deaf man hearing. No, this miracle astounds even the greatest of skeptics gathered. Lazarus, dead four days, stands living and breathing at the door of his tomb. Jesus commands the people, “Unbind him and let him go.” The people, still in shock over this resurrection get to the work of removing the grave clothes and bandages binding Lazarus. It is a miracle. A resurrection miracle.

A tearing of Lazarus from the grasp of death. With words only God can speak. A miracle occurs. But it is more than just a resurrection. With the raising of Lazarus, Jesus offers us an opportunity to see what the future—what the Kingdom of God come into the world will be like. No longer does the darkness hold shadow and fear. We are finally called out of our darkness. As Christians we already know the end of the story. We are standing two weeks outside of Good Friday. We know what is coming. We know that there will be death. We know that there will be pain. We know that there will be darkness. We know what it tastes and feels like this darkness. The salty flavor of our tears. The dry parched feeling in our mouths. The lumps in our throats that won’t go away. This is death. And it has many names. Mom, dad, sister, brother, husband, wife, friend, and so on. This darkness overwhelms but it does not have to consume.

Today, a grave is torn open. A vision of the kingdom is shared. Today, Jesus tells us to take away the stone that holds our hearts from the joy God promises to each of us. Today, we get a glimpse of what will come. Today Jesus shows us how important we are. With the raising of Lazarus, our eyes are opened to the possibilities of our future with God. Jesus looks into our darkness and with the sound of his voice calls us out of our own hand made tombs. From the grasp of darkness and the sting of death, Jesus calls and we cannot help but follow the sound of his voice from behind the stone, from darkness into the light. Lazarus – it is time! Come back to life. Amen.