



The Dress Rehearsal

Fifth Sunday in Lent
2 April 2017

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

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

At our Wednesday night worship service last week, my children's sermon was a complete and utter failure. Truly, I have a pretty good track record with children's sermons. But last Wednesday – the experiment failed – completely. There was no moment of hope. Not even a whisper of resurrection. I watched the video five or six times on Facebook. The idea was solid. I bought the ingredients. I talked up the coming experience. I called the children down to the front. I poured olive oil in a glass vase. I poured water in a glass vase. I added one drop of red food coloring. All was going according to plan. I dropped in the aspirin. And you can imagine what happened...NOTHING! The water and olive oil were supposed to dance with a red food coloring swirl moving between the bubbles. Instead – I had a lonely, sad-looking aspirin sitting on the bottom of the glass vase. So I added three more aspirin – NOTHING! And then someone told me to bite an aspirin in half...sounded good to me...so I bit...and, hello, what does aspirin taste like when you bite it in half – bitter – nasty...why would I do that? So now I am spitting broken pieces of aspirin into the vase as much to get a reaction as to get the nasty taste out of my mouth. And what do you think happened after I spit the aspirin into the vase...NOTHING! And at that point – the only solution was to move on...which we did with a very loud prayer and a quick invitation for kids to go back to their seats. And there in the front row, I sat through the Pastor Angela's sermon, licking my unrehearsed children's sermon wounds and tasting bitterness on my tongue until the service came to end. In hindsight, and on the advice of several of you, I needed a dress rehearsal – so that I would have found out beforehand – that the aspirin was worthless but the power of Alka-Seltzer – now that would have been a great gift of God in the moment I needed it. Imagine my joy – had I simply remembered the commercial...plop, plop, fizz, fizz – oh what a relief it is." Funny



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that the slogan for Bayer Aspirin is..."the more you know, the more you trust Bayer." Sorry Bayer...too little too late!

Today feels like a dress rehearsal. And to borrow from our friends at Sesame Street...today is brought to you by the letter "L" and the number "2." The letter "L" for our friend Lazarus, who is the silent star of our story today...without him – well we miss out on the whole experience...just drop the aspirin in and wait...NOTHING! But with Lazarus we meet his two sisters Martha and Mary who meet Jesus who stayed away two more days and then traveled to the home of Lazarus in Bethany which was just a little under two miles away from Jerusalem where the religious leadership had tried to have Jesus stoned just days earlier. And here we pick up the story.

As is the custom, when Lazarus died, we prepared the body...washed and wrapped and spiced and took it to the tomb. Talk about a journey...walking with everyone weeping, groaning, praying, pleading for some miracle to happen and return our friend to us...but none would come. We laid him in the tomb and had the heavy stone rolled across the entrance to keep out the wild animals and grave robbers and keep that awful stench inside. "Make sure the seal is tight across the front." Oh that smell, was more than any of us should have to bear...the stench takes your breath away...and when it was all done—we said our prayers and walked home. No longer was there a body on our shoulders—the trip home should have been easier but even without the body—we felt the heaviness of that last goodbye. So final.

When news came of Jesus and his disciples approaching our home, we weren't really sure what to do. Rush out to greet or wait and let them come to us. Oh sure, now that Jesus was here...we were supposed to run and greet him with such joy...it took him long enough to arrive...what could be done now...the tomb was closed...the smell too much...the soul gone from our friend Lazarus. But Martha, always wanting to be the gracious host, left the house and went to Jesus. I am not sure what the conversation was but she came running



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back and went to Mary and told her the teacher is here and is calling for you. I don't know how she had the strength but she got up and went to Jesus---I thought it was kind of rude that Jesus did not come to the sisters at the house—but Mary went. And since Mary was going, we all went...we walked a safe distance behind out of respect for Mary's grief. We followed her and when she came to Jesus she knelt down before him. We heard her talking to Jesus...she said, "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died." No questions about his tardiness—really—I was so angry—where was he...if he had the power to heal Lazarus—who did he think he was--to drag his feet instead of rushing back to save the life of Lazarus. When the doctors threw up their hands and said there was nothing more to do—we still had hope that Jesus would come. But no, not even Jesus would come to save Lazarus. Now, Jesus is asking Mary, where they had laid Lazarus? Mary told him to come and see—and so we went to the tomb...Oh my God the stench—you try to cover your nose and mouth with your tunic but that smell of death seems to seep in to your nostrils regardless. And then there was Jesus, beginning to weep—fake tears...maybe...one of the mourners who came with us said, see how he loved him...but another one asked the question, "could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" It did not matter now---Lazarus was dead...and then Jesus spoke. What did he say? Take away the what? Oh dear God...he wants the stone removed from the entrance of the tomb. Thank God Martha stepped in, Lord, she said—Lord already there is a stench because he has been dead four days. And then Jesus looked at her and said, "did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

And then Martha ordered the stone moved away from the opening. And the smell of death surrounded us---one person doubled over next to me. I felt as if I might vomit—but I took short, shallow breaths, and my eyes started to water so much so I could barely see. I was about to say something to point out to Jesus that he could have come sooner and before I could open my mouth—Jesus spoke three words I will never forget. "Lazarus



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come out! Can you believe it? As if Jesus expected Lazarus so simply walk out of the tomb still wrapped in all of his bindings. And the next part you will never believe...as we are standing there...someone screams, someone faints, and someone else points toward the entrance of the tomb...and there standing there straight and tall is Lazarus! Lazarus—dead--really dead—all of a sudden alive—truly alive! It's not possible! It's not possible! It's a trick—it has to be. But then Jesus speaks again..."Unbind him, and let him go. Mary and Martha are so happy running to the tomb—to Lazarus. He's alive!

It is so hard for us to believe! Death always seems to be so final. When that last breath rises and falls there is only stillness. A wondering of whether or not that was indeed the last breath and when we realize that there will not be another rising of the lungs...we too take a moment to exhale and let go—out of peace, exhaustion, relief...a sense of an accomplished end. For our loved one—we know their journey is over. The pastor comes and offers prayers over the body— dear one, our brother in the faith, we entrust you to God who created you. May you return to the one who formed us out of the dust of the earth. Surrounded by the angels and triumphant saints, may Christ come to meet you as you go forth from this life. Christ, the Lord of glory, who was crucified for you, bring your freedom and peace. Christ, the High priest, who has forgiven all your sins, keep you among his people. Christ, the Son of God, who died for you, show you the glory of his eternal kingdom. Christ, the Good Shepherd, enfold you with his tender care. May you see your redeemer face to face and enjoy the sight of God forever.

And then we begin our own journey of grief and preparation. Entrusting our spouse, our child, our parent, sibling, friend to the one who called us into this life. And we begin to let go...that those who have died may leave our arms in this world and fall into the arms of the Savior in the world to come. It all sounds so good...so easy...so complete. And yet we know it is not. Death is messy...it disturbs...it devours. As well it should be---death is the enemy. Not because we think we will live forever but because death takes those we love away from us.



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Death comes like a thief in the night. And leaves us behind with what is left...the mess...the body—now just a shell—the clean-up—the putting away. And so we choose to fight against that which comes to take from us the very love we hold on to with every breath. Death comes and rips from a us a piece of our lives. Death comes and we are powerless to stop it and then we hear the words of our Savior this day..."I am the resurrection and the life." I wonder does he speak those words to comfort Martha and Mary or engender confidence in his own spirit?

Mary and Martha only 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 O God. It is not so much to ask. There isn't any work here for you God. Just open his eyes, breathe life back 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. Perhaps the words of Jesus are more important than we thought as we hear this story today.

Jesus did not say, "I will be the resurrection," or "I could be the resurrection." He said simply, "I am the resurrection." Here and now. I am the resurrection. Jesus brings the joy of life into our days. Eternal life begins not at the end of time, or at the time of death, but right now in this moment.

In the face of death, defeat, and despair, you bring us new life. Help us not to submit to the forces of death. Call us forth to life. Give us the courage to join in your revolution, to take our place in the great victory that you offer to rise with you. For all the ways that we betray your victory of life over death, forgive us. Help us to follow you forth to the future that you offer. Amen.