

From Death to Life

What is the hardest funeral that you've ever been to? I'm sure that most of you have been to a funeral. Which one was the hardest? Was it the funeral for your spouse, your parent, your child, your friend? I think my hardest funeral was the funeral for my Grandpa Lahmann. He died in January of 1990; I was 7 years old. I think that was my hardest funeral because it was the first funeral where I really understood what was going on. I remember being at the funeral home, which was probably my first time ever being in a funeral home. I remember sensing the sadness of my extended family as we sat together in church. I remember the committal service out in the cemetery. It was January, so it was very cold. I remember we all huddled together in the small outdoor chapel. I was a little boy, so I was in the very front, right next to the casket. I remember the pastor hugged my grandma, and I remember that was the first time I'd ever seen my dad cry. It was a hard funeral, and I'm sure you've been to a hard funeral, too.

Today Jesus goes to a funeral. And this was a very hard funeral for Jesus, because Lazarus was his dear friend. Now, you know how the story ends; you know exactly what Jesus is going to do. So you know that the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from death to life is one of the most endearing and most powerful, most comforting and faith-strengthening sections of Scripture in the entire Bible. But today I want you to watch closely and listen carefully to Jesus, because today Jesus teaches us how to handle a hard funeral, how to prepare for our own funeral, and how to take comfort in the resurrection, when he brings Lazarus from death to life.

A man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha... So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." We don't know what the sickness was; and we don't know who the messenger was that the sisters sent to Jesus. But we do know that when Lazarus became sick, the sister turned immediately to Jesus. **"Lord, the one you love is sick."** That's a statement of fact; that's also prayer. "Jesus, we need you, and we're turning to you because you are the only one who can help our brother; you are the only one who can save him." First things first: they went right to Jesus. They simply took their problem to Jesus in prayer and laid it at his feet. What's the first thing you do when a loved one gets sick? First things first. Turn to the Lord Jesus in prayer. Never overlook the power of prayer, or the promise of prayer – God promises to hear and answers our prayers according to his good wisdom. So turn to Jesus first, lay the problem at his feet, and say, **"Lord, the one you love is sick."**

Jesus responded, **"This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."** Jesus knew his friend was sick, but he knew exactly what he was going to do about it. He knew Lazarus would die, but he had a master plan – to perform an amazing miracle of resurrection that would strengthen the faith of everyone who saw it that day, and everyone who would read about it for generations to come. But no one else knew the plan. Do you know someone who is very sick? Is there someone you're close to that you're afraid is not long for this world? Or is that someone you? If you sense that death is at the doorstep, then remember: Jesus has a plan! It's not like Jesus doesn't know or care about what's going on! He has a master plan. And you might not know what that plan is; and you might not be able to imagine how any good could come from the trouble you are facing. But Jesus has a plan. And his plans are always good. **"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"** (Jer 29:11). Now, his plans for your situation may be different from the plans he had for Lazarus. Jesus may not raise your loved one from the dead four days after the funeral. But Jesus' plans are always good. **We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him (Rom 8:28)**. So if we truly trust Jesus, then we must also believe by faith that some good will come from sickness and death. People will be drawn closer to the Lord; faith in Christ will be strengthened. That was Jesus' plan here – when Lazarus died and rose, people were drawn closer to the Lord; their faith was strengthened. That certainly doesn't make sickness and death easy. But if you're staring death in face, or if you love someone who is, then remember this: **"It is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."**

Then we hear, **Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus**. And earlier the sisters had said, **"Lord, the one you love is sick."** These were Jesus' close friends; these people were dear to Jesus. But not any more than you are! When you read this verse, you need to insert your own name. "Jesus loves Kirk Lahmann. Jesus loves me." That's the truth, but the devil wants you to doubt it. "How could a loving God let this tragedy happen to me?" And all of a sudden you're face to face with a seeming inconsistency: "Jesus says he loves me; but look at what I'm going through; it doesn't seem like he loves me!" Go back again and again to this verse. **Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus**. And Jesus loves you, too. Just look at the cross and see his love in action! Jesus died for you to save you because he loves you! And before he died, he said, **"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends"** (Jn 15:13-14). You are Jesus' friends; he laid down his life for you because he loves you! Do not let the devil cause you to doubt the changeless and unconditional love of your Savior for you. Jesus loves you!

[Jesus] went on to tell them, **"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."** His disciples replied, **"Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."** Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. Let this be one of the most comforting truths for all Christians for all time: for us death is a sleep. Every night when I'm home, I tuck my children Samuel and Madilynn and Abigail into bed. I pray with them, and I kiss them goodnight. And I expect to see them the next morning. And while they sleep beneath God's watchful eye, I know they're okay. When we go to a funeral or say a prayer beside the coffin of a Christian, all we're doing is tucking them in so that they can sleep. And we know that beneath God's watchful eye, they're okay. And we expect to see them again, because for a Christian, death is a sleep. Remember what Jesus told Jairus when his twelve-year-old daughter died: **"She is not dead but asleep."** And then he took the little girl by the hand and said, **"My child, get up"** (Lk 8:52-54) – "wake up from your sleep." And here Jesus says, **"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."** The reason death for a Christian is a sleep is that death is temporary. Just as we wake up from sleep, so also someday we will wake up from death. When the night of death is ended, and heaven's morning breaks, the Lord Jesus will call us from our grave and say, **"My child, get up."** Remember that when you walk through a cemetery; people are sleeping – in fact, the word cemetery actually means sleeping-place. Remember that when you go to a funeral; you're tucking someone in. Remember that when you face death; you will wake up again.

And so Jesus travelled on to Bethany, and **On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.** I've found that when a person dies, the lives of their family members all of a sudden become busy and hectic. They've got to meet with the funeral home; they've got to meet with the pastor. They've got to plan a funeral; they've got to plan a luncheon. They've got to pick out hymns; they've got to pick out a casket. They've got to write an obituary and call everyone in the family and take time off of work and travel. They don't have time to mourn. But four days after the funeral they mourn. That's when the busyness fades into a bitter, dark loneliness; and the numbing pain of death really starts to set in. You really ought to know that, because that's when the survivors really need your support. They certainly need you at the funeral, too, with your words of comfort and your presence as a show of support. So when we have a funeral for a fellow member of St. John's, please consider coming. Worship Jesus with the mourning family and show them your love. But don't forget about the survivors four days after funeral, because that's really when they're hurting.

Martha was hurting when she said, **"Lord...if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."** It's not that she was accusing Jesus of not being there in time. She was just letting it all out, pouring out her heart in deep sorrow to her Savior, who also happened to be her close, personal friend. When your heart is broken in deep sorrow, you know what you need to do? You need to let it all out. You need to pour out your heart, first of all to your Savior in prayer, but also to a close, personal friend. Don't bottle it up; let it out. Sometimes the way Jesus brings us comfort and strength when we feel brokenhearted is through the Christian love of a dear friend who is willing to just sit there and listen.

So Martha turned to Jesus, and **Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."** Martha answered, **"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."** And then come these words that are carved onto gravestones and engraved upon our hearts – perhaps the most famous and most precious words Jesus ever spoke: **"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."** Here we have the culmination of the gospel, the pinnacle of God's grace, golden guarantee of Jesus for all who trust in him as their Savior: the resurrection of body from death to life. Someday, long after we die and our body has rotted away, God will miraculously put our body back together and make it perfect and make us alive again. And it won't matter whether your body was cremated or lost at sea or destroyed by fire or buried in the ground. God knit you together the first time in the womb, and he'll knit you together the second time in the tomb. And then he'll bring you out – or, we should say, wake you up. And you will have your same body again, but this time your body will be perfect. And I don't know how old you will look. But I do know that you will never have cancer again; and you will never have Alzheimer's again; and you will never have Lou Gehrig's or leukemia or arthritis or diabetes or depression or heart failure or any other disease ever again. Just as Jesus' body was made perfect when he rose, so also our bodies will be made perfect when Jesus raises us from death to life. And it's all because Jesus is **"the resurrection and the life."**

He says, **"The one who believes in me will live, even though they die."** Physical death is inevitable. It is the curse of sin upon all mankind. **"The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23).** And unless Jesus returns during our lifetime, we all will die; you will die. But whoever believes in Jesus, whoever clings to him in faith as their Savior, will live. You will live at peace with God here on earth, and you will live in perfect communion with God forever in heaven. **"And whoever lives by believing in me will never die"** – eternally. If you believe in Jesus, you will never go to hell; you will never experience eternal separation from God; you will never be forgotten about by God in some cemetery. You'll just sleep, and then Jesus will take you by the hand and say, "Wake up." And with your own eyes you will finally see the resurrection and the life.

Next Jesus meets Mary, and **When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"** Jesus was an emotional person. He knew he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, and yet Jesus, the Son of God, let his human emotions drip down his cheeks. **Jesus wept.** It's the shortest verse in the Bible, and yet it speaks volumes about the love of our Savior. **The Jews said, "See how he loved him!"** See how Jesus loves you, too! He has loved you from all eternity. He loved you enough to bleed and die for you. And to this day his love will never waver or weaken. He cried for Lazarus, and Jesus cries for you, too. When you hurt, he hurts. When you're heartbroken, he's heartbroken. When you feel the pain of sadness and loneliness, he feels that same pain. He's been there; knows what it's like. **Jesus wept.** He cries for you, and he cries with you.

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb, which means Jesus was filled with righteous anger. He was insulted and appalled at what he saw before him. His friend Lazarus was dead; everyone around him was stricken with grief; hearts were broken; people were crying. And why? Why did all of this happen? It was never supposed to be like this! Jesus created people to live, not to die! And yet now death's stranglehold had squeezed the life out of someone he loved. And so Jesus was **"deeply moved."** He was filled with hatred and burned with anger against Satan, for ruining his world; and against sin, for cursing his people; and against death, for taking his friends. He was **"deeply moved."**

So now the story really gets climactic. **Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "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." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And now with every eye riveted on him, Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 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." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"**

And death obeyed, and Lazarus came out – from death to life.

There's really not a lot of post-miracle details in this lesson. Scripture leaves to our imagination what Lazarus would have said, and what Mary and Martha would have done, and how the people would have reacted, and how they all would tell their children the story of what they had seen that day.

But today, as we marvel at the empty tomb of Lazarus, we remember that there's another empty tomb out there. The same Jesus who brought Lazarus from death to life also brought himself from death to life. He who issues orders that death must obey himself ordered death to release its grip on him. And now, by his resurrection, Jesus gives us the strength to face a hard funeral, the courage to face our own funeral, and the comfort to look beyond a funeral and see in his resurrection the promise of our resurrection, when Jesus will again call out in a loud voice, "Come out!" and will bring us from death to life.