FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH

1. Jesus shows his power over death
2. He brings us peace and calm

Have you ever gone face to face with death? What I mean is, have you ever been in a situation where your life or life of someone near and dear to you was truly in danger? If you haven’t yet gone face to face with death, you will. We could talk about times loved ones have face death. Maybe they did die; maybe almost did. Probably have stories of when our own lives were in danger – a serious disease, a major surgery, a car accident.

Let me give you two very good reasons to listen carefully to today’s message. 1) This incident takes place about a week before Jesus’ death. When you see what happens here when Jesus comes face to face with death when his good friend Lazarus dies, it will give you a hint as to what will happen when he comes face to face with death itself. 2) When the day comes when we stand face to face with death, we will have calm, a peace, a knowledge and a faith that will carry us through that difficult time of our life.

As I said, this took place about a week before Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus got word that his friend Lazarus was very sick. He is the brother of Mary and Martha. Whenever Jesus was in or near Jerusalem, he would stay at their house in Bethany. It was only a couple miles from Jerusalem. They loved Jesus very much and Jesus loved them. They had heard the teachings of Jesus frequently. They believed in Jesus as the promised Christ.

So when Jesus got news that Lazarus was very sick, it was sad news. But Jesus did not go right away. He waited a couple days before going to Bethany. By the time he got there, Lazarus had already died. In fact, he was already on his fourth day in the grave.

That is where our text picks up: On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. Remember, it was only a week or so before the crucifixion, Bethany was near Jerusalem and there were many people there mourning Lazarus’ death. In other words, there would be lots of witnesses to the miracle that was about to occur.

We are told: When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.

We often remember Martha as the one who was busy with preparations while her sister Mary sat at Jesus’ feet listening to his Word. But here, it was Martha who went out to meet Jesus and she showed a remarkable faith. Mary stayed home. She said: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. I can imagine Martha had been saying for days: Be patient! Jesus is coming. When he gets here, everything will be okay. He will heal Lazarus. He will make Lazarus all better! But Jesus did not show up right away and Lazarus kept getting worse. Then one day, Lazarus died. Jesus did not make it. If only he had been there, this disaster would not have occurred. But now it was too late!

Martha was standing face to face with death. And looking at her brother’s lifeless body, she said: It is too late! Hope is now gone.

But Martha did not lose all hope. She said to Jesus: But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask. Martha knew Jesus and the power of his Word. Whatever he asked the Father, the Father would do. She believed. She trusted Jesus. Do you see what Martha was doing here? Standing face to face with death, she was looking at one thing, then the other. She looked at death and she despaired. She looked at Jesus and she had hope. Can just see her going back and forth.

If you have ever faced death - your own or a loved one’s - then you know what Martha was
going through. You see death before you and you grieve and despair. You turn to Jesus and you have hope and even joy. But your gaze keeps going back and forth.

When her gaze left death and look at Jesus, he told her: Your brother will rise again. He was telling Martha to keep her eyes on him. Listen very carefully: Your brother will rise again.

Martha answered: I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

Wow! Martha grasped spiritual truths that I am not sure Jesus' own disciples grasped. She knew and believed there would be a resurrection on the last day. Even in this time of sadness, she knew and believed there would be a future resurrection from the dead. That thought gave her comfort.

So Jesus strengthened her faith. He said to her: I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Jesus affirmed and strengthened her faith. He said: You are right that your brother will rise on the last day and I will raise him! When standing in face to face with death, Jesus was saying to Martha: I am bigger than death. I stand closer than death. I am the resurrection and the life. Believe in me!

Jesus asked Martha: Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she told him, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.

Let's get rid of that image of Martha busy with no time for the Word of God. That was an isolated incident and not characteristic of this woman who obviously had great faith. Instead, remember her as the woman who truly understood Jesus and trusted in him for eternal life. She was able to explain and articulate here truths the disciples just did not get. She believed Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God!

So look at what happened here! Martha was wavering! Her eyes looked at death and she despaired: it is too late - nothing can be done. Her eyes look to Jesus and she has faith and hope. Jesus catches that glance of faith and reinforces it and strengthens it and reaffirms it. The hope she has is real. She did not misunderstand. He is the resurrection and the life! Keep your eyes on him.

Having strengthened her faith with his Word and promises, Jesus then demonstrated her faith was not in vain with his actions. We are told: Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. That was how they buried the dead there. The rock was to protect the body from wild animals.

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. The Egyptians were master embalmers. The Jewish people of that day were not. They wrapped the body in some spices to mask the odor, but it did not slow decay. Being the fourth day, the look and smell of decay would have been overpowering, as Martha reminded Jesus.

Then Jesus said: Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone. Then 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.

Jesus made it very clear that what was about to happen was to the glory of God. He wanted everyone there to know the miracle taking place and whom they should glorify: After he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out! The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, Take off the grave clothes and let him go. Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.

Jesus affirmed Martha’s faith and demonstrated to all present his power over death. Jesus affirms our faith in him today also!

Earlier I told you there were two valuable things we would learn from this lesson today. The first one is this: keep this acct about Jesus and the resurrection of Lazarus in the front of your
mind as we remember the last week of Jesus’ life. Remember that as we gather for Maundy Thursday worship, the night Jesus was betrayed, the night he instituted the Lord’s Supper, the night Jesus was taken captive. On Good Friday we will gather to remember the crucifixion and death of Jesus. In short, we will closely follow our Savior as he comes face to face with death himself. In those special services, remember what you heard today.

This Jesus who is going face to face with death is the same one who faced the death of his friend just a week earlier and came out the victor. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is all powerful. If Jesus is being arrested, mocked, abused and crucified, you can be certain that he is facing death only because he wants to. He is doing it because he needs to. I’m sure if we had the power to walk away from death, we would use it! The raising of Lazarus proves that Jesus has that power, but chose not to walk away from death. He faced it! He faced it to defeat it.

Look at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and you see how dreadful it was to stand face to face with death. But Jesus willingly took the cup of suffering and death which the Father had in mind. And because Jesus willingly, intentionally went the way of the cross, this changes everything for us. We deserve death for our sins. But God in his love and mercy passed that death sentence on to his Son Jesus. Jesus took our disobedience and wrongs on himself and he faced the wrath of God for us, in our place.

He proved his power over death by conquering it himself. On the third day he rose again - a glorious event we will celebrate in two weeks. So keep in mind that through it all, Jesus, as he faces death, does so willingly and intentionally for you and for me!

And that means when we face death - our own or a loved one’s - we really do have the evidence that proves Jesus conquers death. He is the resurrection and the life.

As you stand face to face with death, the closer it comes, the more you will be tempted to stare into the ugly face of death and despair. Death is calling for your attention and hopelessness with it. But hear Jesus calling you to turn your gaze to him! Hear him say to you: Do not despair! I am the resurrection and the life! He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

You do, don’t you? Our hearts cry out: Yes, Lord, we believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world.

May this be your comfort and peace when you stand face to face with death. Know that Jesus defeated death. When you are looking at death, you are looking at the face of a loser! The empty cross and open grave prove it. Look at Jesus and believe! Amen!

Pastor Keith J. Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill