

³²When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴"Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵Jesus wept.

³⁶Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹"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."

⁴⁰Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

⁴¹So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I 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."

⁴³When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The 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."

When Your Loved One Dies...

- 1. Jesus is calling you to trust him and his timing**
- 2. Jesus cares**
- 3. Jesus' word proves true.**

Today as we gather, we're celebrating a number of things—the Mount Olive Family Reunion, a time to get the whole family back together again to see each other. On Sunday there's a family potluck meal so we can eat and visit together and celebrate the bonds of being a Family Growing in Christ. This weekend we're also celebrating All Saints' Day or the Festival of Saints Triumphant, which is not a day to celebrate the "Catholic" Saints who were extra good, the best of the best, the ones officially canonized as Saints in heaven because they did so many good works. No, on Saints Triumphant, we remember all those believers, our dear loved ones included, who have died in the Lord, who trusted in Christ for salvation full and free, and now rest from their labors as they live and reign with Christ forevermore. Christ, by his grace, has given them the victory, through faith, even in their death, and so they are the Saints Triumphant!

That is the ultimate message of comfort at the Christian funeral of each and every believer, an event that unfortunately is so often the reason a family is brought back together for a

reunion, so to speak. So maybe it's fitting on this Mount Olive Family Reunion and the Festival of Saints Triumphant that we are meditating on one of the Bible's funeral occasions—the death of Lazarus, which is the text that has served as the gospel lesson for many of our funerals.

It's a story like the death of Lazarus that Jesus uses to teach us the truths that we will need to rely on when it's our loved one who is sick or has died. For some of you, that's as fresh as can be, as your loved one's name is read in the prayer today. For others, the years have passed, but it still feels like it was yesterday. For all of us, it's a day that we may have to face any number of times in our life—the day when our loved one is sick and dying. It's a day we want to be prepared for ahead of time, and so it's the circumstance that forms our theme today, ***When your loved one dies...***

Our first point today is that ***1) Jesus is calling you to trust him and his timing.*** If we go back to the beginning of the story, way before the verses of our text, we see the interesting way Jesus calls Mary, Martha, and Lazarus to trust him and his timing. Chapter 11 starts by telling us that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was sick. These were close friends of Jesus, the same ones whose house Jesus was at when Martha was busy making all the preparations and was mad at Mary for “sitting around listening” to Jesus. **“So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord the one you love is sick.’”** (John 11:3). When the messenger arrived and Jesus heard the message, he responded, **“This sickness will not end in death.”** Now, maybe the disciples heard that part and thought, “Well, he must mean that he’s not that sick.” But Jesus goes on to clarify he’s got something bigger in mind, **“This sickness will not “end” in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”** (John 11:4). That message seems to have gone back with the messenger to Mary and Martha, because Jesus refers to it again later. It was a message that called for them to trust in him and his timing.

He had a plan for this sickness, but it sure was hard to tell what it was. Listen to how the story goes, **“Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick... [he went immediately to see his friend and heal him].”** No, what comes next is a *non-sequitur*, the Latin phrase for, “It doesn’t follow.” **“He stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, ‘Let us go back to Judea.’”** Up to then, the disciples were the only ones who thought staying made sense because they were worried Jesus would be stoned to death if he went back there, but now after two days, they’re surprised he wants to go at all, mostly because they’re scared.

For us, we’ve got to admit that it seems like Jesus does the opposite of what we’d think a beloved friend would do. Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus expecting him to come immediately before his friend dies. They certainly knew he had the power to heal him, but Jesus sends the messenger back and waits around two more days. Imagine being Mary and Martha when the messenger comes back without Jesus, who could’ve come with, and says, **“This sickness will not end in death.”** They’re hearing the message, meanwhile Lazarus may even have already died or is getting to be awfully close to his death bed. So what Jesus is saying and what is happening is not matching up, and even seems to be totally wrong. Therein lies the call to trust him and his timing, something we all know how hard it is to do in the moment!

That's the kind of situation that can make a grieving and confused person really mad at God. "You say you care, God, but I'm not seeing or feeling it. Why aren't you here with me?" The first thing that both Mary and Martha did when they each see Jesus separately is to kind of give him the business about it, **"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."** (21) Do you ever give God the business like that? "God, if you really cared about me, you would've been here faster to help me. Or you would've done this, just like I told you to, or you wouldn't have let this happen like I prayed that it wouldn't." "If you had been here and cared about me, you wouldn't have let my mom die from cancer at 58, you wouldn't have let me blow out my knee at the ripe age of 26. You wouldn't have let this sickness happen to my wife. You wouldn't have let my child suffer a traumatic brain injury. You wouldn't have let her get sick and go to hospital the first time, the second, the third, the fourth, fifth. You could have at least stopped my childhood house from burning! I could've done without that! And if you were watching out for me at all, my second kid would have been a perfect little angel instead of a screaming fussball for months. Gimme a break! God.

I've been angry and thought or said everyone one of those things along the way. I haven't suffered like Job from the Old Testament but I've spoken against the Almighty like him, **"God does whatever he pleases, he carries out his decree against me."** (Job 23:13). All of that kind of stuff we say in ignorance and in our pain, thinking we know it all, while we say it to the all-powerful, ever-present, and all-loving God who is calling us to trust him while his plan unfolds. Right before Jesus left to finally make the journey to Lazarus after waiting two days, he let the disciples in on more of the plan. **"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up...Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."** (John 11:14,15). *The plan that Jesus was slowly unfolding was calling everyone to trust him as he let Lazarus die so that he could raise him from the dead and reveal his glory as Savior. The purpose of that plan was for people to see it and believe!*

The next point we need to take in is that despite the strange timing and however much we might have convinced ourselves that he doesn't care **2) Jesus does care!** He went to console and comfort his dear friends in their grief and he deals graciously with them even when they give him the business about being "too late". He comforts Martha and points her not just to the resurrection on the last day, but to the fact that he is the Resurrection and the Life standing right in front of her. **"I am the resurrection and the life."** (John 11:25) and I'm right here.

Next, he comes to Mary who is weeping over the death of her brother. Her grief has clouded any memory of what Jesus had promised her about Lazarus through the messenger. But her grief also affects Jesus. **"When he saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled."** (33). It bothered him to see them so much in grief and pain and when he saw the place where Lazarus was laid, **"Jesus wept."** It's the shortest verse in the Bible packed full of so much meaning and comfort. He wept because he loved and cared about his friends. And everyone who saw it knew it. **"See how he loved him."** they said (John 11:36).

At this point in the story, you can zoom in and see Jesus' personal and genuine love for his friends in that moment, and you can also pan out to the 10,000 foot level to see his care for you and the whole world at that moment. What he is about to do is going to tip over the first domino that will lead to the Jews putting him to death on the cross where he will pay for the sins of the whole world. **"From that day on they plotted to take his life."** (John 11:53). But even his own death wasn't going to stop him from tipping that domino, pouring out his love for his friends on that day, and for everyone on the cross.

He had told Mary and Martha that this sickness would not end in death, though death certainly was involved. Now we see him make good on his word. **"Take away the stone,"** he said. And Martha, who just before still knew that Jesus could ask for whatever he wanted, now objects, thinking that opening the tomb is a gross waste of time, since he's been in there four days. But now Jesus holds her to believing the promise he made to her. **"Did I not tell you that if you believe, 'you will see the glory of God.'"** (John 11:40). Then he raises Lazarus from the dead and calls him out of the grave for all to see, so that they might believe in him. *The sickness did not end in death!* It may have gone through death and back out the other side, but it did not end there. **3) Jesus proved his word true.**

Humanly speaking, the plan was pretty hard to trust. The journey was fraught with grief and pain and a loved one dying. It may be the same for you **when your loved one dies, 1) Jesus calls you to trust him and his timing, 2) he cares about you, 3) and his word will always prove true.** Think again about the promise Jesus made about Lazarus, **"This sickness will not end in death."** That's really a promise that becomes true for every believer. Sickness, cancer, bacterial infections, or even death itself will not end in death and defeat for you because of what Jesus promised Martha and all of us. **"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."** (John 11:25).

On the other side of death, Jesus gives life to you, dear believer, and your loved ones and all the Saints who have triumphed through the blood of the Lamb. There will be one final glorious and everlasting family reunion in heaven where you will see your loves ones again, and more importantly, we'll all lay our eyes on Christ in all his glory forevermore. Did he not tell us that if we believe we will see the glory of God?!!

In the meantime, let me leave you with one final thought, something people often say at the funeral lunch when the family is reuniting and reminiscing after the funeral is over. One family member says to another, "You know, we should really get together under better circumstances, more often than just for funerals." That's a pretty good idea for a Family Growing in Christ like us to follow through on—to be together week after week comforting each other with God's promise of life and eating the Supper of forgiveness together as a family until that day when we feast together forever in heaven. God be with you till we meet here again soon. Amen.