

March 26, 2023
Fifth Sunday in Lent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

John 11:1-45 (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:1-11)

EVERYTHING HAS LIMITS – EXCEPT FOR CHRIST

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

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St John, the 11th chapter, which you heard read earlier.

We live in a world of limits. You can purchase a new car but there is a limit how far you can drive before you need to fill the fuel tank. There is a limit to how long you can drive before needing an oil change. There is a limit to how long each part on the car will last before it has to be replaced.

Our bodies are much the same. As you age, you find that the original equipment that you were born with does not operate like it once did. Physical tasks that once were second nature become more difficult or even impossible to accomplish. Regardless of how healthy you eat and how much you exercise, your body has limits. It is going to wear out and die. Everything has limits. Well... everything except for Jesus. He has no limits. He is not bound by time and space. He is not bound by death.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, has died. Due to the sin inherited by all mankind from our ancestor Adam, unless Jesus returns really soon, you and me and everyone else will die. The mortality rate is 100 percent. Every life will reach its limit.

Lazarus was ill so his sisters sent word to Jesus that the one whom He loved as a brother was ill. Jesus has the power to intervene. He has the power to give sight to the blind, to make the lame walk, even to heal the sick and the leper. He has already performed many miracles and signs. Mary and Martha know Jesus can help. But for His good friend Lazarus, Jesus does nothing. He said:

“This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” (John 11:4)

Jesus has no limits. He is neither bound by death's timetable nor death itself. Just as we heard last week that the healing of the blind man was in order that God's glory may be revealed, so too with the raising of Lazarus. (cf: John 9:3) God was not bound by dry bones in the desert. (cf: Ezekiel 37:1-14) God is not bound by death. It is in death that God does His greatest work. It is in facing death that Jesus is triumphant over death.

Time was short. Jesus' appointment with death on the cross was near. He could have healed Lazarus from afar like He did with the Centurion's servant. (cf: Matthew 8:5–13) But He waited. He waited for two whole days before beginning His way to Judea where the Jews were seeking to put Him to death.

His disciples believe Lazarus is merely sleeping, so:

“... Jesus [tells His disciples] *plainly, ‘Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.’*” (John 11:14–15)

Raising Lazarus after his body had been lying in the tomb so long that it has begun to decay would be Jesus' crowning miracle. However, it would only be a *prelude* to God raising His Son Jesus from the dead. Raising Lazarus is a chance for the people to recognize that Jesus is the Christ, God in the flesh of man, and give glory to God, before Jesus Himself, faces and conquers death.

Upon hearing that Jesus was coming, Martha went to meet him. There is no question in Martha's mind who Jesus is. But like our vehicles and our bodies, Martha's faith has limits just as your faith and mine has limits. Like those times when you pray without expecting an answer. Or when you pray and you believe your prayer is left unanswered. But the fact is, God always answers prayer. Sometimes His answer is yes. Sometimes, no. Sometimes, it is His hidden will that you wait for a while. Sometimes, He hides His face from us. In His loving wisdom, sometimes we must weep... we must lament... and even mourn.

Jesus tells Martha that her brother Lazarus will be raised from the dead, but she assumes that He is talking of the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. This only makes sense. Just like we do today, family and friends surround our loved ones in their grief and encourage each other in the hope of the resurrection, that we will all be raised from the dead on the Last Day. But Jesus declares exactly who He is saying:

“*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.*”
(John 11:25–26)

This is one seven “***I AM***” statements of Jesus, recorded by St John. The Jewish people of Jesus' day know exactly what He is saying. When Jesus says: “***I am***,” He is saying that He is God. He is saying that He, Himself, is the literal resurrection and the life. The resurrection and the life are not two separate concepts. They are one just as Jesus is One. No resurrection and no life exist apart from Him. When He is absent, resurrection and life are absent; when He is present, resurrection and life are present.

Believing in Jesus does not relieve you and me of temporal death. But Jesus is neither bound by death's timetable nor death itself. Ordinary, mortal life fades away, but the life that Jesus gives never ends. It is in that sense that whoever lives and believes in Jesus will never die.

Anyone who has lost a close loved one knows the pain and sorrow that death brings. When Jesus arrives at the tomb and sees Mary and all the Jews weeping, He was deeply moved in His spirit and greatly troubled. (cf: John 11:33) St John records that:

“*Jesus wept.*” (John 11:35)

Because of the sins of mankind, Jesus is moved to tears. He sees the painful and deadly effects that sin has on Lazarus and Mary and Martha and on all the others gathered grieving. He sees the effects that sin has on each of us, and He weeps. He does not weep because He is a softy or He has regrets. His tears are grounded in His love and compassion for mankind. He knows that you and I are dead in our trespasses, and like Lazarus, we cannot save ourselves from death.

Jesus prays aloud so the crowd would know and believe that He was dependent on His Father and that the Father had sent Him. At Jesus command, Lazarus came out of the grave wrapped in his burial linens. Four days in the tomb were no match for the Jesus who is the resurrection and the life, which He gave to Lazarus. It is a miracle that causes Jesus enemies to move forward with their plans to put Him to death. (cf: John 11:49–53)

It would be two weeks later when Jesus would be handed over to sinful men, be brutally beaten within an inch of His life, nailed to the cross, and die to save all mankind from their sin. But death could not have its way with Jesus. Three days in the tomb were no match for Jesus who is the resurrection and the life, which He claimed for Himself. Any amount of time in the tomb is no match for Jesus who is the resurrection and the life that He gives to you and all who trust and believe in Him.

Just because we believe in Jesus' miracles and believe and have faith in Him – it does not mean we can comprehend His power over the grave. We cannot comprehend how we will be resurrected or what it is going to be like living in eternity. But those things really do not matter. What matters are the promises you have in Jesus.

Jesus promised Martha that her brother would be raised from the dead – and he was. Jesus promised that He Himself would be raised from the dead after three days – and He was. You have Jesus' promise as well. He says:

“Because I live, you also will live.” (John 14:19)

Through the power of the Holy Spirit you have been given faith in your Baptism and through hearing of God's Word. You have the witness of St Paul's Spirit inspired word as he writes:

“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4)

Everything in this world has limits. We live in frail and dying bodies – bodies that have limits. But thanks be to God, for all who are in Christ Jesus, there are no limits. You are no longer bound. Paul says:

“¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” (Romans 8:1–2)

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” (Romans 8:9–11)

We have an Almighty Lord Jesus Christ in whose death and resurrection, declared victory over death and the grave. When a loved one dies, you do not have to grieve without hope. Since Jesus died and rose again, through Jesus, God will raise all who die in Christ into eternal life. (cf: 1 Thessalonians 4:14) You have Jesus' promise that life for the believer does not end in death. You will be raised on the Last Day and forever celebrate the joy of life we have in Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.