

**JOHN 11:17–27, 38–45.** (EHV)

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them concerning their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary was sitting in the house. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, **“Your brother will rise again.”** Martha replied, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the Last Day.” Jesus said to her, **“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never perish. 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.” ... Jesus was deeply moved again as he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. **“Take away the stone,”** he said. Martha, the dead man’s sister, told him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, because it has been four days.” Jesus said to her, **“Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”** So they took away the stone. Jesus looked up and said, **“Father, I thank you that you heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”** After he said this, he shouted with a loud voice, **“Lazarus, come out!”** The man who had died came out with his feet and his hands bound with strips of linen and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus told them, **“Loose him and let him go.”** Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him.

There are some traits of our so-called advanced times that are not sinful at all in and of themselves, but I do wonder how much they have helped the next generation to think seriously about religion. For instance, since we are such a wealthy nation and generally have access to good health care, we do a great job covering over the ugliness of death and eliminating much of that ugliness.

Perusing one church’s burial records from the 1860s, I read of a six-year-old boy who died after a three-day bout with stomach inflammation. I read of a woman who died after a nine-month illness following her last childbirth. I read of a woman who lay in her bed suffering from dropsy for thirteen weeks before she died. I read of a man who was bedridden for many weeks in great pain from stomach cancer before he died. And many more like that. All of these people suffered and died in their homes. Their family members and pastor saw them. Then there were all the infant deaths. The corner of the cemetery belonging to one of my former churches was designated as the children’s cemetery because of the large number of children who died in the late 1800s. People didn’t generally escape the ugliness of death back then.

Do you know what most of those deaths would look like today? A person lying on a hospital bed in a sterile room hooked up to all sorts of machines monitoring his or her vitals, perhaps also assisting their function, and hooked up to an IV containing liquids with various medications and pain-killers, and who is thus only partially conscious and coherent, if at all. Then, when the person dies, he or she is quickly shipped off to an embalmer. So when it comes

time to view the deceased one last time, what do you often hear people saying? “He *or* She looks so peaceful!” The only time we’re regularly confronted with the ugliness of death is in the case of a tragedy such as a car accident or a work accident or a natural disaster or the casualties of war—which is why they say there are no atheists in foxholes, right?

Again, none of these things are wrong; we can even count them as blessings. But I can’t help but wonder: If death is gussied up and its ugliness covered over like that, then why should anyone think about how to escape it and how to escape its cause, sin?

This morning in our Gospel, Jesus does not cover up the ugliness of death. But he doesn’t just show it to us. He confronts the ugliness of death.

### **1. Jesus Confronts the Emotional Ugliness of Death**

First Jesus confronts the emotional ugliness of death. Jesus arrives at the outskirts of Bethany four days after Lazarus had died. Lazarus was the brother of Jesus’s good friends Mary and Martha, and he himself was also Jesus’s good friend.

Martha appears to have been more active, dealing with her grief by keeping busy, perhaps greeting and catching up with those who came to comfort them and generally doing her best to be a good host. In the process, she hears that Jesus has arrived and she goes out to meet him. Away from all the crowds, she is able to open up her heart: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Part of the emotional ugliness of death is the regret, isn’t it? We usually always find something we should have done or said that we didn’t. Never are sins of omission more on display than they are after a loved one has died. On most days, we’re only analyzing what we’ve actually said and done; we hardly ever think about things we’re *not* saying or doing that we *could* and *should* be doing. But death suddenly makes us think of all the missed opportunities. “I wish I...,” “If only I...,” or, “If only he *or* she...”

But Martha’s regret actually contains a hint of a sin of omission on Jesus’s part: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” That can sometimes be a part of the emotional ugliness of death too. In their bitterness and sadness, people end up saying things to loved ones, and even to God, that they don’t mean or that they wouldn’t normally say. They try to soothe the regrets of their own soul by transferring their guilt to others.

But Martha recovers herself, “But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Jesus confronts the emotional ugliness of death, in part, with his comforting promises. Death is never the end for a believer. The body will one day rise again in glory. That promise helps with the emotional ugliness of death by tempering our regrets. What we could have or should have said or done, we will still be able to say and do, as long as we too remain in the faith. Jesus’s promise of eternal life and happiness for those who have died in him takes the sting out of our bitterness and sadness.

And Martha knows that Jesus’s promises are true. She answers, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the Last Day.”

Jesus reinforces and strengthens this knowledge: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will

never perish. Do you believe this?” Not only will the lifeless body of the believing dead person rise again at the last day, but even now his or her soul still lives and enjoys life with God.

“Yes, Lord,” Martha told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

Now we come to the verses that we skipped over in our Gospel. In them, Jesus confronts the emotional ugliness of death as it relates to Mary and the friends of the family. Martha returns to tell her sister that Jesus is on the outskirts of town. Mary quickly gets up and leaves to go find him, and the crowd goes with her thinking she is going to mourn at Lazarus’s tomb.

Mary is more reticent and introverted than her sister, and everything that she had been turning over inside of her now comes out. She falls at Jesus’s feet in her grief and chokes out the same words her sister did, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And that’s all she can get out.

Jesus sees her there weeping in this groveling position. He sees the friends of the family who have followed her weeping in sympathy for Mary and Martha. He sees the damage death has wrought on this scene. And we’re told he was deeply moved in his spirit and was troubled.

After Jesus had asked them where the body was laid and they told him to come and see, we get one of the shortest verses in Scripture: “Jesus wept.” Jesus confronts the emotional ugliness of death, in part, by sympathizing with it. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus was made like his brothers in every way, except without sin, that during his days on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears, that he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. Jesus knows firsthand how ugly death is; he has felt it in his bones. No one else can really ever say they know exactly what you’re going through, because loss and grief affects everyone in personal ways that are unique to them. But Jesus can say that. He does know. His insides have churned; his spirit has gasped; his eyes have wept.

In fact, Jesus reacted so emotionally that he almost got the people to forget about their own emotions temporarily. They got distracted by him. Some saw him and said, “See how he loved him.” Others saw him and asked, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” In essence they were saying, “How can those tears be real? How can he really have cared about this man, how can he really care about his family, if he let him die?” It does not seem that these words proceeded from pure anger, but from genuine confusion, the same as when believers today say, “How could you, God? How can this be part of your plan?”

Whatever the case may have been with their hearts, we’re told that Jesus was once more deeply moved because of it. Jesus doesn’t just sympathize with our inner turmoil and sadness; he is also moved by our confusion and our doubts.

## **2. Jesus Confronts the Physical Ugliness of Death**

But Jesus doesn’t want to leave us in turmoil, sadness, confusion, and doubt. He now confronts the physical ugliness of death. This is where this miracle really stands out from Jesus’s other resurrection miracles. When Jesus raised Jairus’s daughter, she had maybe been dead for a few hours and was still lying on her deathbed. When Jesus raised the son of the widow in Nain, he had maybe been dead for a day; he was just being carried out in his coffin.

But here we're told that Lazarus's body had already been wrapped up, placed in some sort of cave for a tomb, and a stone had been placed at the entrance. And when Jesus commanded that the stone be removed, Martha warned him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor," or as the King James Version puts it more bluntly, "by this time he stinketh." After being dead for four days, Lazarus's body had already begun to decay and decompose. Death is ugly. Death reeks.

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" Jesus is not reminding Martha of some specific promise he made to raise her brother. He is reminding her that he had said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never perish." He is asking her to use a little logic and apply his promise. If Jesus is the reason that our bodies will rise on the Last Day, after we have been dead for many days, if he is the reason our souls never die, then doesn't he have the power to raise a dead person long before the Last Day, if he desires? Does Martha think that Jesus simply wants everyone to hold their noses and gag in disgust?

So they removed the stone. Jesus prayed to the Father, so that the crowd would know where this miracle came from and that Jesus was the Son of God.

Then he shouted in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

And what a sight this must have been. A man emerges from the cave, his hands and feet wrapped in strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. This raggedy sight is also part of the physical ugliness of death. He was wrapped because no one wanted to make physical contact with the corpse when he was buried, and no one wanted to look at the color-drained face. How could he even walk now, with his feet wrapped up? Did he walk? How could he even see now, with the cloth around his face? Did he see?

It mattered not. Death dissolved at the word of the Lord, and Lazarus followed his Savior's voice. Jesus told the people to remove the wrappings and let him go. He wanted everyone to see this was in fact Lazarus. And it was.

Jesus confronts the physical ugliness of death so that when we hear the promises he makes when we're dealing with the emotional ugliness of death, we don't just think, "Well, Jesus is just saying that to make me feel better." No, Jesus actually has power over death. Jesus can actually reverse and undo all the ugliness of death.

He proved it himself, right? Or do we doubt that the man who raised Lazarus after he had been dead for four days could raise himself after being dead for only three? Do we doubt that Jesus could have woken up in the darkness of his tomb and removed the strips of linen and rolled up the cloth around his face and arranged them each separately, when he was able to call forth Lazarus with all of those things still on him?

Yes, do we doubt that one day Jesus will do the same thing for us that he did for Lazarus? That he will call out in a loud voice, "Come out!" That regardless of whether our dust is at least all together in a rotting box beneath the earth or has been scattered to a thousand graves in the wind or on the water, still nothing will be able to hinder us from emerging from the grave put back together and whole, unpreventably following the voice of our Savior?

Brothers and sisters, as we approach Good Friday and Easter Sunday, as we approach our own departure from this life, let us use a little logic and apply his promise—a promise backed up by this amazing miracle: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live,

even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never perish.” Within that promise, the ugliness of death turns to glorious beauty. Amen.