

A Sickness Not Unto Death

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Loving God, fountain of every blessing,
Open to us your life-giving word,
and fill us with your Holy Spirit
so that living water may flow out of our hearts—
a spring of hope for our thirsty souls and our thirsty world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

The first half of John's gospel is called by some the Book of Signs. There are seven signs that Jesus performs that point to a greater truth about the Father and the Son.

1. Jesus turning the water into *what?*... wine
2. The miraculous multiplication of *what?* ... Loaves and fish
3. Jesus walking on the *what?*... water
4. Three healings: the official's son, the man at the pool, and last week the man born blind.
5. Today's passage includes the seventh and crowning sign—Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead.

This is not only a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection, it teaches us about the power of LIFE: the power of God and the Son of God to shine through in the midst of hardship, adversity, and even our greatest foe—death.

With Jesus, life, the abundant life, has the last word. We have the hope of resurrection and life in Christ Jesus.

Gospel Reading: John 11:17-44 (NRSVue)

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus^[e] had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.^[f] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,^[g] the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said,

"Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

**The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.**

SERMON – "A Sickness Not Unto Death"

In our gospel reading, one of Jesus' closest friends, Lazarus, was gravely ill. He probably wasn't all that old—likely close in age to Jesus, who was thirty-something. The chapter begins with this statement: "A man named Lazarus, who lived in Bethany..." The name "Lazarus" means "God helps." And the town of "Bethany," some scholars believe, is a play on words that means "House of Affliction." So the plot of the story is laid out for us: *God helps a man in a house of affliction.*

This isn't just Lazarus' story—it's ours too. Sooner or later, for a short time or a long time, all of us will dwell in that same house of affliction—it's our human lot. And in some seasons of life we feel this affliction more acutely than in others. We're all mortal. Just as we all have a birthday, we will all have a day we die. Guaranteed. It's in the house of affliction we often wrestle with the most simple yet vexing question ever asked, "*Why?*"

After racking our brains and racking our hearts, we usually have only silence as an answer. Confident, quick, and tidy responses usually ring hollow. The Bible rarely provides answers to those menacing "why questions." But that doesn't mean God leaves us hanging, or his Son Jesus hanging. In exchange for our why questions, God answers us with a Divine Who and a Divine How. God gives us not a principle or a proposition, but a person. God gives us a presence in the midst of our very real and difficult predicaments. God's help for us is found in Jesus, who comes to us in our house of affliction. We've been promised that our house of affliction won't be our permanent residence. Jesus has another place prepared for us. The Father's dwelling place in heaven.

But even on this side of heaven, Jesus will not abandon us or leave us orphaned. This promise is put to the test in the story of Lazarus. Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, sent a message to Jesus, who was several days journey away: the one you love is deathly ill. Rather than taking the first flight out, Jesus stayed put. *Why did Jesus wait?* There's a great mystery here. Today, there are times we wonder—did God forget to show up when I needed him most? Now it is quite possible that at the time Jesus got the message his friend Lazarus was already dead. But Jesus didn't stay forever. "Let us go," he said. "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will go and wake him."

By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany—he was four days late. Lazarus was buried. The funeral already happened. It was Jewish custom to bury the deceased the same day they died. When Jesus finally arrived on the scene, Mary stayed at home, but Martha came out to confront Jesus, to put him in his place: “Jesus—you blew it. If only you’d been here my brother would not have died.” You healed blind and lame strangers— why couldn’t you heal your dear friend? Were you so busy that you forgot us? Martha’s sister Mary had the same response to Jesus later. Also the mourners. If only you had been here. If only. Jesus saw the bigger picture. He knew this tragedy would bring glory to God. “Martha, don’t get stuck in the past. Look to the future. Look forward to the hope of the resurrection. The future dramatically impacts our present.”

“Martha, your brother will rise again. Life and beauty will triumph over death and decay. We’ll be given new bodies. We won’t be homebound. Or confined within this beautiful, yet achingly frail mortal coil of ours.” Martha believes this. But this future reality understandably hadn’t yet taken up residence in her present sorrow. Then Jesus uttered his famous words:

“I AM the Resurrection and the Life.”

I AM the source of life. I am life itself. Not I WILL BE, but I AM the resurrection and the life RIGHT NOW. It’s not a doctrine. Not an idea. But a person, a real presence—Jesus—God’s I AM. Those who believe in me, EVEN THOUGH they die, they will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. In Christ, we live—even in death. Life bursts into the reality and mess of our grief and sorrow. The Jesus life is a life that survives tragedy and affliction and death.

Then Jesus does yet another surprising thing. It’s one of the shortest verses of the Bible and one of the best: *Jesus wept*. This is what I love about Jesus—he wept. Over his friend Lazarus. Over the city of Jerusalem. While believing, Jesus still grieved. He felt deeply. “Weep with those who weep” the Scriptures teach. He takes seriously our pain and enters into it. The tears of Jesus give permission to our tears now. He gives us hope, but he doesn’t make light of our plight. Jesus gives us not only the gift of hope and life, but the gift of tears. It’s OK to cry and to feel the loss of a loved one. To ask “why?” Jesus called to Mary even in her tears when she stayed home and didn’t meet Jesus. “The Master is here and is calling you.” Answering Jesus’ call, Mary got up, and brought her tears and questions to Jesus, and knelt at his feet once again. Jesus personally gave us permission on the cross when he would later say, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The Man of Sorrows—acquainted with grief and pain—shares our loss with us. Jesus fully enters into life and death with us. We can’t get rid of him—he just won’t let us out of his loving embrace.

Death is not the final word in this story. With everyone present, Jesus prayed and then commanded the stone covering Lazarus’ grave to be rolled away. Martha, ever practical and thinking ahead, was a little skeptical about removing the stone. “Jesus, it’s been four days—the open tomb is going to stink to high heaven.” Or as the KJV puts it, “he stinketh.” Jesus looked her in the eye, “If you believe you will see the glory of God.” “Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Take away the stone.

In front of everyone, Jesus lifted his eyes, raised his voice and with a great cry gave his orders, “LAZARUS COME FORTH!” The dead man came out. Horror and joy all bundled up into one.

“Loose him and let him go.” And this was an Easter foreshadowing. Like Lazarus, Jesus would also come out the grave—for good. And in Christ, so do we.

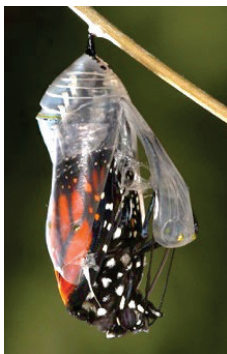
This is our hope—Jesus alone can speak life into death’s darkness. God’s love in Christ is stronger than death—even now. I appreciate the guidance pastor and author Nadia Bolz Weber gives to her fellow pastors: Preach from your scars, not your wounds.

Not long after returning from my sabbatical I was not in a good place. It was about a six-month period of feeling dead. I’d never been through anything like it before. I was overwhelmed by transitions and some painful experiences: my dad dying, my mom’s poor health, children transitioning into college, the challenges of COVID and rebuilding the church, and major transitions at Immanuel. During the day, waves of anxiety would ripple through my stomach.

I wasn’t sleeping well at all for months. My pounding heart would wake me up in the middle of night and I couldn’t get back to sleep. I tried breathing exercises. Other exercises to get you back to your senses. Like looking for five things you see. Four things you hear. Three things you feel with your hands. Two things you smell. One thing you taste. Panic attacks are no joke. Things I loved doing lost all interest for me: reading, working out, preaching. It was hard for me to concentrate, pray, or read the Bible. I missed some meetings I normally wouldn’t. When I was with people, I had little to share. There was just emptiness. Exhaustion. Most of the time I was just silent. There was less of me—less John in me. Nights were hellish and it felt like this would never end. Doing the bare minimum took all the energy inside of me.

It’s hard for men to admit they’re struggling with depression and anxiety. It was for me. As a pastor, I felt my faith should be stronger to overcome this. But I knew I needed help. I confided in several of you at Immanuel. A few of you approached me. Several of you were praying for me. I was able to share my struggles with family. I have a guys book study group I kept meeting with. I was able to find a good therapist from a colleague in our presbytery.

My therapist helped me find a specialized doctor to prescribe antidepressants and anti-anxiety medicine, which helped raise me up a bit in the hole I felt trapped in. When I could pray, I prayed the Psalms. Listened to a lot of gospel music. Pressed through with my gratitude journal.



Very slowly, I was noticing signs of life returning. Little sprouts of interest, curiosity, emotions were returning. I began sleeping better. Could actually start exercising again. I started cracking jokes again—or at least attempting to. The Scriptures were coming alive again to me. I cared more. I felt Jesus, through my relationships and through the Scriptures, through the community of faith, calling me out of my tomb. Giving me life again. Shafts of light were punching holes in my darkness. The stone was being moved aside. Grave clothes were being shed, layer by layer. Jesus was returning me to life again.

It was a Lazarus moment in my life. A resurrection. And I can understand just a little better what people go through when they experience depression and anxiety. And I'll be more prepared if it happens again. But here's the thing, we know after however many years, Lazarus was eventually laid to rest a second and final time in that same tomb. But because of Christ, though his body is long dead, he lives forever with God. We will too.

Our task, whether in life or death, is to believe in Christ, answer his call, come out of the tomb, and find life in the midst of death and sorrow.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Christ's Raising of Lazarus," Athens, 12th–13th century, Wikipedia
Signs of Life image: Monarch butterfly chrysalis

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