

9 March 2008  
Lent 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Turning a Cemetery into Paradise”

Text: John 11:17-27, 38-53 (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:1-11)

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

The love that we have here on earth for each other, is no where near the love that God has for you. *Think about that for a moment.*

For who do you love? A spouse, a parent, a child, a grandchild, a good friend? Those whom God has given us are a big part of our lives. We build our lives around them. And our love for them means that we give up a lot for them. And not just things – we give *ourselves* to them . . . in a *very small way* reflecting the self-giving image of God in which we were created.

One of the places that love shows itself most is at funerals. Like the one we heard about today – the funeral of Lazarus. No matter how many times our world tries to tell us that death is our friend or even a solution to our problems, funerals show us that is all a lie. Death is the enemy. Death takes our loved ones away from us, and leaves a hole. And whether it happens suddenly or slowly doesn't really matter, does it? The pain is great. What God has joined together, death has torn asunder.

And we can't do anything about it. If we were estranged, we could reach out and try to make amends. If we were sick, we could be there for our loved one, sitting at their bedside, holding their hand. But dead . . . there's nothing we can do. We are helpless. Empty. And we begin to speak like Mary and Martha. *If only* I had been there more . . . *If only* I had done things differently . . . *If only* I had my loved one back again . . .

*But know this:* just as the love that we have for each other here on earth is no where near the love that God has for you, so also the hate that we have for death is no where near the hate that God has for it!

For imagine . . . How sad are we when *one* person dies? What then about the sadness of Eden, when because of Adam and Eve and their sin, *all of humanity* died? When all of creation was plunged into sin! **That day, Adam and Eve turned Paradise into a cemetery.** A place where joy was replaced with sadness, and life swallowed up in death.

And then the “if only’s” came! *If only* you hadn’t given me this wife! *If only* you hadn’t created that snake! *If only* you had done things differently, God! Sounds a bit like Mary and Martha, doesn’t it?

And us. For yes, we too like telling God what He should have done, or what He should be doing. As if He needed our advice or help in running the universe. As if our wisdom and ways are so great. Lord, *if only* there was more stem cell research. *If only* there was a cure for cancer. *If only* you had stopped my loved one from smoking. *If only* you had stopped that drunk driver. It’s all your fault God, our grief cries out. *As if God doesn’t love life and hate death even more than we.*

How do we know? **Because into this world of death stepped the Lord of life.** For God didn’t show His love of life and His hatred of death by His tears at Lazarus’ grave, He showed it *by being there* in our flesh and blood. For life is not just what Jesus gives, it is who He is and what He has come to do. And so He speaks, and His words give life. **And so while Adam and Eve turned Paradise into a cemetery, Jesus turns a cemetery into Paradise.**

*Lord, if you had been here . . .* Martha, Mary, fellow mourners, *He was there!* Four days later than you had hoped. A lot later than Adam and Eve had probably hoped! But it was not too late, but just the right time. For He has come not to heal *one* sick man or raise *one* dead man, but to be the remedy for the sin-sickness and death of the whole world. Not just to give us back what we had in this pitiful and sin-filled life, but to give us even more. Not just life, but eternal life. Not just happiness, but Paradise.

And so Jesus came. At just the right time, in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4). As we confess in the Creed, He is conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, and made man. The Lord of life come to die, that we who die might rise to life again. And so Jesus’ encounter with death that day in Bethany was just the prelude to His encounter with death on the cross. And His visit to the grave that day was just the precursor to His own visit to the grave – when His lifeless body was itself

taken down, wrapped in grave clothes, and laid in a tomb. And therefore so too His victory over death with the raising of Lazarus was but the foretaste of His own resurrection. When God would burst the bonds of death not with His Word from without, but with the Word made flesh from within! When He would strip sin, death, and devil of their power once and for all. Life triumphing over death. *For He **is** both the resurrection and the life.*

But Jesus' raising to life of Lazarus did not only foreshadow the work that He would accomplish in His own death and resurrection, but also the work that He is doing *in us* and *among us* still today. His work in Holy Baptism, where by water and His Word Jesus calls *us* out of the tomb of our sins and raises us to a new life. And His work in the Word of Absolution, where Jesus unbinds and frees *us* from the sins that entangle and ensnare us and threaten to drag us back down to the grave . . . and worse. Now, as then, Jesus *is here* and is the resurrection and the life for us – that we may live. A new life. Everlasting life.

Oh, I know . . . perhaps you cannot see or feel that right now. Perhaps mired in the trials and troubles of this life, the sin and sickness, the disappointments and death, you feel like Mary and Martha. Or you look around like Ezekiel and see only dried out heaps of bones – like you're living in a cemetery of dead relationships and dreams, and all you see around you are the tombstones of the past, mocking you and claiming victory over your sorry life. . . . I know.

And so in the midst of this *valley of the shadow of death*, your Lord comes and *prepares a table before you in the presence of your enemies.* (Ps 23) He hasn't promised to take you out of these troubles, but *has* promised to come to you and bring to you His life-giving body and blood, that you eat and drink and receive His forgiveness and life. That though your enemies and past mock you, they cannot defeat you. For that grave has already been robbed! That victory has already been won! For you are in Christ and Christ in you, and as St. Paul told us, therefore, you live. *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* Not now. Not ever.

And so you can live, in confidence and peace. Not regretting the past, for it is forgiven. Not dwelling on the "if only's," but looking forward to the life that Christ is giving. And not relying on what we see and feel in this world, but like Lazarus, hearing the Word of Christ and rising to life – each and every day. Each and every day, your cemetery turned to Paradise. Each and every day, Unbound and set free! Each and every day, *fixing your eyes on Jesus* (Gradual). And so each and every day, truly

living and truly loving.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.