



Northeastern Minnesota Synod ELCA 35th Synod Assembly

April 29 – May 1, 2022
Cragun's Resort and via Zoom

Stand firm and be deeply rooted in God's love!
Ephesians 3:17b (CEV)

Bishop Odgren's May 1 Synod Assembly Sermon Recordings and Script

[Bishop Odgren's Gospel + Sermon mp4 link](#)

[Bishop Odgren's Sermon Only mp4 link](#)

Gospel Reading: John 11:17-27 (CEV)

When Jesus got to Bethany, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was only about two miles from Jerusalem, and many people had come from the city to comfort Martha and Mary because their brother had died. When Martha heard that Jesus had arrived, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Yet even now I know that God will do anything you ask." Jesus told her, "Your brother will live again!" Martha answered, "I know he will be raised to life on the last day, when all the dead are raised." Jesus then said, "I am the one who raises the dead to life! Everyone who has faith in me will live, even if they die. And everyone who lives because of faith in me will never really die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord!" she replied. "I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God. You are the one we hoped would come into the world."

Dear friends in Christ, grace, peace, and mercy are yours through our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

This weekend, as we have gathered as the people of God in the Northeastern Minnesota Synod during the 2022 Synod Assembly, we have been deeply rooted in Bible study, in conversation with one another, in our devotions and worship as an assembly, and in hearing the ways that we are engaged in ministry together across Christ's Church. It has been enriching and uplifting. We have been deeply rooted in connection with God and each other, reminded that God's Word impacts our daily life and that God's Word is richest when shared in community. We are deeply rooted in a boundless God who loves us – all of us, without exception.

So why is this story, the raising of Lazarus, told this week? Why does this passage matter? *Does* it matter? What does it say not just for today, but to our life in this chaotic and violent world? How does what we do or how we live our daily life speak into, let alone help, in a time of such polarization, fear, and hatred?

The good friends of Jesus, Mary and Martha called for him as their brother Lazarus is dying. Now Lazarus is the only male in the household in a culture in which a woman without a man was profoundly vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. Lazarus was not only a beloved brother but was also the closest thing to Social Security that Mary and Martha had, and he was slipping away. So, they enlist Jesus to come to their home out of love for his good friends and to *do* something.

But Jesus doesn't come. He doesn't come to be with his beloved friend as Lazarus lies dying, and he doesn't come to honor his friend by being present at his funeral.

Imagine the depths of sisters' grief and anger, especially as Martha comes running out to meet Jesus when he finally does show up.

Her heart wrenched by grief, gives voice to not simply a question but a lament, an accusation, even: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Perhaps she represents all those who will come to church this week heavy in heart, the grief of their loss still fresh to the point of being overwhelming. If nothing else, her situation proves that being faithful to Jesus is in no way a guarantee against pain and tragedy. There is no one on earth whose righteousness, wisdom, hard work, or good planning will preserve her from seeing the depths that Martha sees. Good people become widows and orphans. It's a fact, and no less of a fact for Jesus' coming.

But there is something else. We can cry to God from the depths.

There is no depth, no loss, no tragedy, no disease or death, nothing on heaven or on earth or under the earth that can place the world or anyone in it beyond God's redemption. Good people become widows and orphans, but God defends the widow and the orphan, and will not leave those God loves bereft.

God is redeeming the universe God made and loves. When we cry out from the depths, God hears. When Jesus seems slow in coming to our aid, he is coming, nonetheless. And if we worry that it is too late, Jesus shows that it is never too late. After we have become convinced that all is lost, when we are ready to concede to death and are seeking only to contain the damage or bury it, Jesus demonstrates that there is no loss, no death, no tragedy, no depth, no power in heaven or on earth or under the earth that can place a person, a situation, or a world beyond God's redemption, beyond the reach of infinite love and abundant life. There are no bounds where God's love and grace is concerned.

And we are deeply rooted in this boundless God!

Martha's lament, only moments earlier, turns into grief transformed and into a courageous confession, not simply about resurrection in general – "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" – but a particular confession in Jesus, the one who tarried while her brother died yet who promised her life *here* and *now*: "Yes, Lord," she says, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Perhaps Martha stands for all those whose faith in Jesus seems incredibly resilient and who serve as both witness and encouragement for the rest of us.

Jesus, the one who gives life, who calls us out of not just death, but even our fear of death - the one who weeps for Lazarus and his sisters is the one for those who stand by and neither understand nor believe in God's promise of life. Jesus, the one who, in raising Lazarus, starts the chain of events that will lead to his own death. The one, finally, whom death itself cannot contain, promises Martha, and promises us, "I am the one who raises the dead to life!" "I am the resurrection and the life."

Friends, the promise of resurrection stands at the center of *all* our worship celebrations when we gather – that’s why this story is important for today. That’s why it’s important to remember that we are deeply rooted in a boundless God that offers life and hope for *all* people!

Imagine those in the crowd who witnessed Lazarus’ resurrection and whom Jesus commands later in this story to: “Unbind him and let him go!”

This part of the story is particularly intriguing. It says to us that even God’s work of resurrection is not completely absent of our participation or absent of our being caught up in the act itself. It’s not so much that God needs us to do God’s work of resurrection, it’s that God’s work of resurrection isn’t limited simply to those whose life is renewed in the moment but finds its fulfillment as it also catches up, impacts, and even transforms those who witness and are drawn into it.

“Unbind him and let him go!” This is an invitation to be drawn into God’s life-giving work, to participate in, and in some sense, complete the reach of God’s mighty acts. It is a promise that resurrection is not simply a matter of “then” – whenever that might be – but it is equally a matter of “*now*.” And ultimately, this is a call to follow Jesus, the Light of God’s resurrection. And death need no longer terrifies us – we can act *now*.

Now there is something to do. *Now* we find courage to live amid fear. *Now* we sense God’s promise of life helping us not only live in the shadow of death with confidence, but also to resist the power of death that we concede too, perhaps, too quickly. This isn’t an invitation to deny death – but God’s promise of resurrection does grant us both the permission and power to *defy* it: to defy death’s ability to overshadow and distort our lives, to deny death’s threat that there is nothing else.

Death **does not** have the last word - we are free to live **now**, to struggle **now**, to sacrifice **now**, to encourage others never to give up **now**, to live out of love rather than hate **now**, and to have our actions directed by hope rather than fear...**now!**

This is a call to discipleship, really. And here’s the thing, following Jesus can lead us into dark places – uncomfortable, dirty, smelly places. It can lead us into danger and bring us into contact with dangerous people. Following Jesus calls us to our pews and our hymns and our rituals, but it also demands that we go out into the world. Deeply rooted in a boundless God, Jesus calls us to love. And love can be difficult sometimes.

Following Jesus means that we must love, and it’s okay if that scares you a little. It should. But because of God’s resurrection promise, the life we share in this world here and now no longer should terrify or paralyze us. It means that you have your eyes wide open to the cost of discipleship. I hope that when the Church hears Jesus’ cry, “Lazarus, come out!” all the people heed his words.

Church, Come out! Come out of your comfort zone. Come out of your fortresses. Come out of your “good old days.” Come out of your sin. Come out of holding on to the idols we grasp so tightly. Come out of the lies that tell us how to succeed, consume, spend, buy, then donate and be happy. Come out of your slumber, Church, and join in Kingdom work – Kingdom living. Come out of your slumber and go into the mission God sets before us. Come out of your slumber and live anew, go and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We are deeply rooted in a boundless God - the massacre of innocents, the politics of fear and division, the rhetoric of hate – these are all heart wrenching elements of our life in the world, but they do not have the last word either and are not the final reality.

Prompted by God’s promise of resurrection we can stand against them, hold onto each other amid them, work together toward God’s justice and mercy, and offer a testimony deeply rooted in life and love that runs contrary to the testimony of the world.

People of God, we are called to be unbound ourselves – and to unbind all those immobilized by the fear of death and loss of hope. We are invited this week – and always, to tell the world that the God who raised Jesus from the dead needs us, wants us, invites us to participate in, and even complete God’s resurrection work by caring for, standing with, and lending our courage to those who are suffering and grieving, those who are most vulnerable and in need. We have work to do, a call to answer, a resurrection life to lead here and now. We answer this call knowing where our roots are grounded, knowing that Christ is with us, and that the Holy Spirit will sustain us on the journey.

God who raised Jesus from death, the God who promises us life eternal... *this God is not finished yet!* And we are the instruments of God’s resurrection life, grace, justice, and power here and now. Amen

