

Trust Christ—and Live!
Sermon on John 11:38-45
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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Jesus said: *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.* Thank God that's true for you yet today! Amen.

God's Word for our special consideration this morning is John, chapter eleven, verses thirty-eight through forty-five—Jesus' encounter with his dead friend Lazarus. I'll be reading this account throughout the sermon—and it's on the first inside page of your bulletin, if you'd like to follow along....

Introduction: How Do We Know Christianity Is Correct?

Dear fellow Christians—who will die, as surely as did Lazarus, and who will rise from the dead, just as surely as Lazarus did:

One of the best questions I've ever gotten during my ministry – and it's a question I've gotten repeatedly during my ministry – is this: “Pastor, how do we really know that our religion is right? I mean: the Jews think their religion is right. The Moslems think their religion is right. Everybody else thinks their religion is right. So, how do we know that Christianity is correct?”

Lots of years ago I used to sort of dread that question. Now I relish receiving that question, and I'm eager to answer it. God's Word to us today is an especially good section of Scripture to explain how you can answer that question, too....

Exposition: Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

Allow me to read to you Jesus' encounter with his dead friend Lazarus—and explain it as I go along.

First of all, you should know that the account we're reading today took place nearly two thousand years ago. It was the final few months of Jesus' ministry—the winter months of what was probably the year thirty AD. Jesus had been on the far side of the Jordan River, and he was making his way slowly south to Jerusalem—where Jesus would suffer, die, and rise from the dead for us.

At that time: two sisters, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus that his friend, their brother Lazarus, had grown sick. Jesus delayed. Lazarus died. And then, Jesus took the day-or-two-long trip to Bethany—twenty miles uphill from the Jordan River. Bethany was a scant two miles – across the Mount of Olives – southeast of Jerusalem's temple. It couldn't have been a village of more than a couple hundred people.

When Jesus got to Bethany, Martha went to meet him. He spoke with her. Then she called for Mary. Jesus spoke with her, as well. That's when we read – and this is our sermon text – *Jesus was once more deeply moved.* Actually, it says: Jesus was *upset*. He had been *upset* earlier—so much so that he wept. Now, he was *upset* again. He was upset that sin had caused this kind of grief in the world. He was upset – as much as ever – at Satan: for authoring sin.

Then it says: Jesus *came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.* That's the way tombs were in those days. Farmland was at a premium in the fairly little land of Israel. People didn't make cemeteries out of what little good soil there was. Instead, the rocky land had an abundance of rather large, limestone caves. These

the people excavated further—generally at least one network of caves near each little town. That became the city cemetery.

Archeology suggests most of these individual tombs had a doorway, sealed by a sort of a boulder set in a sloping channel, just as we read here. Then each tomb had a small entrance room, with space to set the funeral stretcher. And beyond another opening in the back was the place of burial itself—a smallish room, with niches or shelves, usually either eight or thirteen of them (I've read), where bodies would be laid. Actually, after many years people would gather the accumulated bones, sometimes putting them in boxes, so that each tomb could be reused continually over the centuries.

It was at such a cemetery, just outside of Bethany, that we read: **"Take away the stone," Jesus said.**

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." "Why subject these people to the stench—and the potentiality for ceremonial uncleanness? Besides, what's the use?" That's the sense of Martha's words.

But **Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"** "Martha, I promise to give you a glimpse of 'the sum total of God's divine attributes, chief of which is his inestimable love.' Martha, you're going to see the glory of God—trust me!" That's what Jesus was saying.

So, we read, they took away the stone. And pushing these many hundreds of pounds of rock up the channel and out of the way—well, it probably required the combined effort of a bunch of men.

Then Jesus looked up and said, Father – and no one could address God as *Father* in exactly the same way Jesus could – **"Father, I thank you that you have heard me.** See: Jesus had perfect confidence his prayer was already answered. **I knew that you always hear me.** Jesus always had perfect confidence that his Father would hear his prayers.

But I said this for the benefit of the people standing here—literally, *the crowd standing around*; it had to have been at least dozens of people—probably removed from the tomb, probably close to Christ, and maybe almost in a semicircle in view of the tomb. And for what was Jesus praying? It was for the same thing he had wanted for Martha: **that they may believe that you, my Father, sent me."**

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice. I'm sure he was directing his voice right through that opening, right into the tomb. I'm sure that no one could fail to gain the impression that this was the authoritative, almighty God calling to one of his creatures.

And what did he say? *Lazarus!*—his name means "My God is my help!" and Jesus was demonstrating that, at this very moment. **"Lazarus, come out!"**

... And *the dead man* heard the voice of his Creator and his Good Shepherd. *The dead man*: whose cold, dead, decaying, motionless body lay lifeless deep inside that tomb—that *dead man* instantly warmed to life, his flesh immediately got firm, and he got up, as if from mere sleep. **The dead man came out, his hands and feet** – and in fact, his whole body – **wrapped with strips of linen**, inside of which there were generally sweet-smelling spices, **and a cloth around his face.**

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." You see: Lazarus had people to see and things to do. He was living, breathing proof that his friend Jesus was God and Savior.

And the message wasn't lost on those who witnessed all this: **Therefore many of the Jews**, and these were from Jerusalem, **who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did**, just as so many Galileans had seen during the past couple of years—many of these Jews **put their faith in him**—just as we ought to do.

Application: This Account Guarantees Christianity Is Correct!

And there you have it: the account of Jesus' encounter with his dead friend Lazarus, in which he raises him from the dead. So, what are we going to make of it?

My friends: in a few words, "Trust Jesus—and live!" Trust Jesus, and live—as did Lazarus, as did Mary and Martha, and as did those inhabitants of Jerusalem. In a few more words: This account of Jesus raising Lazarus is proof positive for your heart and mine and for a whole planet full of people: Christianity is correct, and we've got to share the news.

Let me explain it like this.... The eight hundred pound gorilla in the living room of your life: you know, that big, glaring, hairy, scary problem that has to be dealt with, but no one wants to deal with it, because it's just so big and scary—that eight hundred pound gorilla in the living room of your life ... is death.

My friend: you're going to die! I'm going to die! Our cold, dead, decaying, motionless, lifeless bodies are going to lie deep inside a grave. And before that happens, we've got to decide how we're going to survive the experience!

Now, first of all, consider what every other religion says about death....

The really secular and purely worldly people in our nation – and that's got to be at least a major-sized minority of our people – as well as practitioners of primitive religions: these all have one view of death. Really, they ignore the need to deal with it. "When we die, we die," they say—as if we pass into nothingness. But the conscience of honest, sensible people – even all the pagan philosophers – tell them: each human soul is too awesome an enterprise simply to vanish into thin air.

Hindus and Buddhists and (in our land) practitioners of new age and mystic religions—these have another view of death. You keep getting more chances: through rebirth, or reincarnations, after death—and the better your behavior now, the better your chances next time. All of this, of course, belies the fact that everybody's body continues to lie in its grave without a second chance at all.

Moslems also have a different view of death. They acknowledge a resurrection of the body to life with God—if you've been a good Moslem and behaved yourself. But who can behave himself sufficiently? If God is good (and he surely is!), and if God is pure (and he surely is!), and if God knows all (and he surely does!)—then God surely knows that I have not been purely good. And he's no second-rate God; he can't tolerate our sinfulness; he couldn't reward us to raising us to life.

So, we're back to the beginning.... My friend: you're going to die! I'm going to die! And how are we going to survive the experience? Secularism doesn't help. Buddhism doesn't help. Hinduism doesn't help. Islam doesn't help!

But Jesus Christ helps!! Jesus Christ is the answer!!! As we read today: Jesus Christ, on a real day, at a real place, with dozens of real live witnesses, really raised a really dead person to real life! And Jesus promises, and I quote: *A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear my voice and come out!*

See: Jesus Christ is the answer!!! Some months after the account we read today: Jesus himself, on a real day, in a real place, with dozens of real live witnesses, really himself rose to real life. And Jesus promises, and I quote: *Because I live, you also will live.*

And how can Jesus not be the answer?!? He explains this whole process of death! Our bodies die because they suffer the sickness of sin; *the wages of sin is death*. In order to reverse death, then, Jesus has to reverse sin—and of course, that's exactly what he did; *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

So, far from ignoring sin and death, far from pretending there's some second chance regarding sin and death, far from deceiving ourselves that we can overcome sin and death—Jesus conquered sin and death for us. That's what we need, and no one else claims to have done it for us. That's how we know Christianity is correct—and all other religions are false, worthless, and in fact: eternally dangerous.

Conclusion: Since Christianity Is Correct, We Need to Share It with Others!

To sum it up, then, Christianity is really very simple, isn't it? And you can explain it – and its importance – to others. Now listen carefully to this. You just say: “Here's why I trust Christ, and here's why you need to trust Christ, too.... My body has a problem; it's going to die. And that's because my soul had a problem; it's sinful. But Jesus took care of my soul's problem; he took away my sin by dying on the cross. And Jesus takes care of my body's problem; he promises to raise me from the dead. That's why I'm a Christian. And that's why you need to be a Christian, too.”

You can say that. And you need to say that—to your family and to your friends, as you speak to them. You need to say that—to your community and to your world, as you support this church with your prayers, efforts, and offerings. And in the end, when a person's cold, dead, decaying, motionless body lies lifeless in the grave, nothing else is going to matter! Nothing else matters!! Trust Christ—and live!!! Amen.

Jesus promises: *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.* Thank God that's true for you yet today! Amen.