

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org)



## The Sermon Text — John 11:32-44

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

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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 for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' 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.'

## SERMON

When he traveled to Jerusalem it appears that Jesus stayed at the home of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus who lived about a ½ hour walk from the temple in the village of Bethany. To reach Bethany from the holy city you cross the Kidron Valley, go up the hill past the Garden of Gethsemane, and past the Mount of Olives.

Upon his arrival in Bethany Jesus was informed that his friend Lazarus had died four days earlier. Like the story of the death of all people who die too soon, this story is full of emotion. There is a bit of denial, a bit of bargaining, some anger...many of the stages of grief come rolling out in just a few sentences. One of the sisters, Martha, came from the house and started things going. She said, "What took you so long, we sent the message days ago?" Then she concluded, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died."

"If," is one of the biggest two letter words in all of language, particularly when it is used with the word,

"then." If he had only stopped drinking, then he would be still living." "If only we had gone to the doctor sooner, we might have caught this before it got out of control." "If I had only lost that weight I may not have needed that knee surgery." "If you had been here my brother would not have died."

Evidently the two sisters had been talking and agreed, because when Mary arrived she sang the same song...if you had been here my brother would not have died.

This story starts out as a blaming story with the sisters and their friends all involved. Then it shifts gears. Mary arrives and she weeps. All of her friends weep. Jesus saw the tears flow and John reports that "Jesus wept." Even when we confess that our dear one is "in a better place," death is so very sad. It separates us from those we love. Death is a robber.

So, Jesus wept. He wept out of compassion. As I have reminded you before, compassion comes from Latin words that mean, "to suffer with." Jesus was compassionate. He suffered with a widow from Nain who lost her son. He suffered with a woman who had hemorrhaged for twelve years, a man who had leprosy, a father whose little daughter had died, and many many more. His heart went out to them; he had compassion on them.

What many people ask for, and what God will not provide, is to be shielded from illness, and spared from suffering. This he will not do. This, he has chosen not to do. It is hard to imagine a world where there are no consequences for our actions. It may be possible to construct a world where there is no cancer, no heart disease, no diabetes, no serious illness, where people live forever, but it is not this world.

When Jesus decided to intervene, and, in the words of the novelist Flannery O'Connor, turn the world upside down, bringing Lazarus back from the dead, Mary reminded him what kind of a world he lived in. "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus lived in a world, we live in a world, that has the stench of death. This past week we read that a 39 year old man in the Town of Mifflin was electrocuted when a car went airborne on Midvale, not far from where we live, hit a tree and the driver died dead on impact. A three year old was riding with his father in a tractor. The tractor hit a bump the youngster grabbed the handle to the cab and died. How many

people lost their battle with cancer this past week, or died of a brain aneurysm. The stench of death is in the air.

When Lazarus answered the voice of Jesus---“Lazarus, come out!” he appeared with his hands, face and feet bound with strips of cloth, to remind us that even those who survive bear the marks of death. Some of us have experienced heart attacks and/or cancer and live today metaphorically with the marks of death on our bodies.

Would it have been possible to design a world where we could have total freedom and no pain? My little brain can't imagine it. Instead we live in a wonderful world where God has chosen not to remove our pain, but rather to enter into it and share it. God does not prevent our suffering, but suffers alongside us. God does not prevent bad things from happening, but gives us resources --such as other believers--to handle the bad things. Finally, God does not prevent death, but gives us the hope of resurrection.

Eugene O'Neill has written a play called *Lazarus Laughed*. After Lazarus is raised from the dead he says, “There is no death,” and he laughed. “There is only life...there is eternal life in NO, and there is the same eternal life in YES. Death is the fear between.” And Lazarus laughed. “Laugh with me. Death is dead. Fear is no more. There is only life and laughter.”

Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that poetic? There is, however, a problem. O'Neill is wrong. He is getting ahead of himself. There is death. It is all around us. It is no illusion. It is powerful. It steals those we love. It separates us and wounds us.

The good news is not that death has been eliminated, but that it is not final. It does not have the last word. God has the last word. God gives us hope in the midst of hopelessness. God gives us light in the midst of darkness. One of these days each one of us will come to the full and complete realization that we will die. At that moment, we are ready for the good news that comes straight from the heart of Jesus. We who believe will live again. In fact, only those who die are eligible for resurrection. No death. No resurrection.

We are still in the discovery portion of our journey. We are still living by faith and not by sight. So for the moment, we will go on asking our questions. We will continue to stumble along, weeping for those we have lost, mourning those who have left us.

At the same time we are here to be schooled by the gospel writers who declare that death is not the last word. Jesus is the last word.

A few moments ago I said that it is nearly impossible to imagine a world where there is no cancer, no heart disease, no diabetes, no serious illness, where

people live forever. There is one who can imagine such a place, St. John, the writer of Revelation. He helps us to imagine. He tells us of a new heaven and a new earth, after the first heaven and the first earth has passed away, we will have a place where we will dwell with our God, and God will dwell with us. There he will wipe every tear from our eyes and death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things will have passed away.

We approach this new place in faith. There our questions will be answered, and we will dwell as new creatures with the one who is forever, the resurrection and the life. But until that time, we will have to live in a world where death is all around us. The difference is that we live as people who know how the story ends. We live as people of hope. Amen © 2011