

John 11:1-6,17-27 - Now a certain man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>This Mary, whose brother Lazarus was sick, was the same Mary who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one you love is sick!" <sup>4</sup>When Jesus heard it, he said, "This sickness is not going to result in death, but it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." <sup>5</sup>Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup>Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed in the place where he was two more days. <sup>17</sup>When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. <sup>18</sup>Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. <sup>19</sup>Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them concerning their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary was sitting in the house. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup>Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the Last Day." <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies. <sup>26</sup>And whoever lives and believes in me will never perish. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup>"Yes, Lord," she told him. "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

Not to minimize the life-and-death aspect or the health and suffering aspects of our current crisis, for some of us the worst part is missing out on the sports. We would be right in the middle of the March Madness basketball tournament. And worst of all, when Sports Ill. or whoever just did their whole bracket simulated tournament, the Wisconsin Badgers came out on top as champions. This might have been a good year to not quit early. The other thing happening with no live sports is that they are replaying some of the most exciting games from other years. And since they are the most exciting games, a lot of them involve a team that seems to have no chance coming back in miraculous fashion. But watching them as replays, we have fair warning. Often the channel guide even tells the outcome in the description. So then, don't watch the ones where your favorite team finds a way to snatch defeat from victory at the last second. Watch the ones where your team is going to come back amazingly and win in the end. And maybe you don't remember how they did it; you just know they are going to win. So you can watch comfortably, knowing no matter how bad it's looking, you are going to have victory and joy in the end. And way even better, today we see even more proof from God's holy Word how our friend Jesus – the real friend who never lets us down and never comes up short – is our All-the-Way Friend. The Friend who cares and cures. The one friend that will always be there at the end, and always makes it end the right way. The way that means total joy and victory in the end.

We can see that here with Jesus' close friends Martha and Mary. They would let Jesus and his disciples stay with them when they were visiting Bethany. They would listen to him talk about his kingdom and work. They were good enough friends that Mary could go all out in showing her love for Jesus, no matter what anyone else might think. Like when she poured that really expensive perfume on his feet. And Jesus had used it as a lesson, scolding people who thought she should have shown her love in a different or more practical way. The good friend Jesus steps in and sticks up for her and says, "Don't you dare tell someone *how* their love and faith have to show themselves." And he was a good enough friend too, to correct them when they were going off the wrong way. When other priorities got in the way of hearing his Word. Or when they were working hard but were irritated with others who weren't helping as much – that was the clue that there was something wrong with their motivation. Jesus was the kind of friend who would do the difficult things for them.

So now when their brother Lazarus is really sick, they know just where to turn. They send a message to Jesus, “**Lord, the one you love is sick!**” And here, notice a couple things. The word for love here is their word for friendship – something that makes us want to be around another person and do something for them. But also notice they stress, “**the one YOU love.**” Yes, Lazarus loved Jesus – but that’s not strong enough to rely on, especially in time of trouble. But the one YOU love. Jesus’ Love – that can be counted on. And the next time that his love is mentioned, in verse five, now it is the special word for the very special commitment love. The one-sided, self-sacrificing love, that loves because it loves. The love that doesn’t have anything to do with anything on the other person’s end. The kind of love that had God send his one and only Son to suffer and die for us whom sin had made his enemies. The kind of love that had Jesus live and suffer and die for us.

A love so high that people often can’t understand it. It says here that “**Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.**” “**Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.**” But really the word here isn’t “Yet.” Really the word is “therefore.” Jesus loved them so much and that’s *why* he stayed away so long. Now that doesn’t make much sense to us, but then again neither do most of the deep things of God. But this was actually going to be something better for these people. It was going to glorify God and strengthen them in their faith. Like when the apostle Paul thought he could do more and better work for the Lord if he wouldn’t be slowed down by a certain physical problem. And yet he was told in 2 Corinthians 12, “**My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.**” The reason for his hardship and suffering was that it would glorify God and make Paul stronger in his faith. Well here too, Jesus loved these people so much that he would do whatever it took to build them up in their faith. Maybe it’s kind of like being a parent – where it’s much easier to let the kids run wild and think you are “oh so nice and cool of parents”; but what they really need is the really difficult, tedious work of correcting them and training them. So even though everyone else might think, “what would be best is for Jesus to hustle over there to Bethany and heal that guy.” Then his friends wouldn’t have to worry and be so sad. And all the people would be really impressed and Jesus would be more popular. But that’s only when we’re doing the planning. Not the One who knows best.

And that great Friend, who does know the best – well, he knew the best thing then was to wait for a couple more days. Best for Mary and Martha, and best for his disciples. See, we don’t have to understand God’s timetable. But it is always right. Now we can just about imagine what must have been going through Mary and Martha’s minds. “Oh, Jesus, it’s nice to see you. But it’s a little late now. What took you so long?” In fact, Martha does say, “**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**” So if Jesus was such a good friend, why didn’t he do something? Well, he was doing something. He was working on the faith of these two women and a lot of other people. Even when he let seemingly awful things happen, he was strengthening their trust. Like here where he takes Martha by the hand and helps her up gradually, one step at a time. Gets her to confess that yes, he did have the power to heal. And then to get a little more from her, Jesus says, “**Your brother will rise again.**” So Martha goes a step further and confesses her faith in the resurrection. And then he leads her a step further – a specific confession that he is the Son of God. And Jesus was going to add even more for her and her sister and many others. Sure he could have come right away and healed Lazarus. Or just made him better from way over on the other side of the Jordan River. But that wouldn’t have provided all the blessings he wanted to give. Plus this is where you can really see what kind of Friend Jesus is. When all the human experience and possibilities say, “Too late.”

When it comes to death, it becomes easy to see that this is the only friend who can help. Yeah, I know some people are actually banking on the idea that science and medicine will figure out a way to stop death. And at the Alcor Life Extension Institute in Scottsdale, Arizona (home of the head of

legendary baseball player Ted Williams) so far at least 1250 people have paid \$200,000 each to have their bodies frozen in liquid nitrogen or \$80,000 each to freeze just their heads, and it's already happened for 168 of them. Yet no matter what science comes up with, they're not ever going to be able to cure death. But our friend Jesus can – and does. See, this friend goes way beyond anyone else. He goes way beyond the last scene – even beyond death.

And at a deathbed or a funeral, it's nice to have Jesus, a friend who really cares. Who knows exactly what we're going through. But even more than that, the friend who can do something about it. He replaces death with life. And he can do that because he *is* the resurrection and the life. As he was living the perfect life under God's law as our substitute, his enemies plotted to kill him. And in his own time and in his own way, Jesus let it happen. Gave himself into the enemies' hands. Submitted to their false trials. Endured their torture. And allowed himself to be crucified. And there on the cross he took away the sting of death by paying for all the sins that make death necessary. He died so we could live. And even there, he didn't stay dead. He busted out of the grave to tell us, "I didn't stay dead and you won't either." When we and our loved ones die, that's not the end. We don't have to be punished by God for any of our sins, because Jesus was punished for them all.

So he cures everything, even death, by guaranteeing our life. He says, "**I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies.**" Whoever believes in Jesus is alive forever. Even the grave can't get in the way of that. We will one day have our bodies and souls glorified to live in perfection with God forever. Our Friend guarantees that. And not only guarantees our life for after we die. Yes, Jesus did show his power over physical death by raising Lazarus (I hope that's okay that I gave away the ending there). But he also replaces death with life even closer to home. Maybe Martha sounds almost disappointed as she says, "**I know that Lazarus will rise in the resurrection on the Last Day.**" To her that's got to be something that seems too far off into the future. But Jesus tells her, "**I AM the resurrection and the life** – right now! **Whoever lives and believes in me** – right now – **will never perish.**" The life Jesus gives us isn't a far away thing. It's a right now reality. With Jesus with us, we've already crossed over from death to life. We're not the living dead any more – those zombies of the world wandering around without forgiveness, without a Savior, without hope. And that changes everything. Whether we live or die physically, we are the Lord's. And we won't die spiritually or eternally. Life is ours. The burden of guilt is off our shoulders. The fear of death is shattered. Life is ours every day and forever in eternity.

And that changes everything. We know for sure we have forgiveness. We know we're right with God. We know we have eternal life in heaven. And we know God makes everything turn out for our best. Which means a whole different attitude toward life. Think of how gloomy things looked for Mary and Martha and them, but Jesus fixed it way even after it seemed possible. And it's the same for us. We never have to worry whether or not a certain situation is going to work out for us. The only question is how God's going to do it. What amazing miracle he will use; what life-changing lesson we'll learn in it; what unexpected twist is going to give us the perfect ending he wants for us. Like watching that basketball game and knowing we will win. And since we know for sure, then it doesn't matter how many points we're down or how much time is left on the clock. In fact, the farther down we are, the more desperate the situation looks, the more exciting it's going to be to see how the Lord works this one out. As our all-the-way Savior takes us all the way to real victory – guaranteed. Amen.