

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" 9Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." 11After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." 12The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." 13Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. 15For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

17When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." 23Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." 28When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32When 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."

33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35Jesus began to weep. 36So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" 38Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39Jesus 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 four days." 40Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42I 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." 43When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44The 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."

45Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

I heard about a funeral this week. A preacher declared that if you believe in Jesus then you will be with God for all eternity. And if you do not you will go straight to hell. And this woman we are burying this day is with God because she believed.

Now I am sure that sermon has been repeated millions of times. But I think it is wrong. No, not the part of about believing in Jesus or not believing in Jesus. What was wrong was the part about the woman. What sort of a superhuman person is this that can look into a human heart and know what is going on there. Oh, we all may think we know about our sisters and brothers, but I remember an afternoon visit after a funeral twenty five years ago.

Her husband had died – I was on vacation when it happened – the co-pastor with whom I served in Hettinger, North Dakota had conducted the funeral. The whole town had come out – her husband was a man beloved by many – I still remember my visits with him on winter afternoons – sitting by a glowing stove while the storm raged outside. I liked him a lot.

I went to see his widow as soon as I returned to town. As soon as I sat down she began. How dare that pastor say what he did. He said he was a good man – he did not live with him in this house. Everybody loved him but my life was a hell because of him. I learned something that day.

I cannot see into a person's heart. I can never know whether faith is in that heart – or love –or hope. We all could see his deeds – his honest dealing in business – his befriending those who were down and out. I could have pointed to the place where he sat on Sunday mornings – but like my colleague I had no idea what went on at home.

Nor could his wife see into his heart. But there was much she held against him.

Jesus wept. Jesus sobbed. Jesus began to weep. No matter how this verse is translated the meaning is clear – Jesus was crying. John tells us that Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping and that Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” and they said to him, “Lord, come and see.” And Jesus began to weep.

Tears. But what do they mean? What was in Jesus heart that led him to tears? As John tells this account it seems clear from the beginning that Jesus knows that he will raise Lazarus from death. Surely Jesus knows that Mary's tears will be turned to cries of joy in a matter of minutes – that those who weep with her will be astonished to see Lazarus alive once more.

Why did Jesus weep? Because of the sorrow death brings to all of humanity? Did he weep because humans are so slow to believe in his power over death? I have no idea.

Why did you come to worship this day? Because you know your presence will bring joy to God? Because your mother or father said you had to come? Because it is a habit?

What about the money you put into the offering plate? Duty? Doing your fair share? A joyful gift of gratitude? A way to show your love for Jesus?

On that day when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead we are told absolutely nothing about Lazarus other than the word of the sisters, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Mary and Martha believed Jesus loved Lazarus. Jesus affirms this when he calls Lazarus his friend.” There is not a word about Lazarus' goodness, his faith, his deserving to be raised. Just Jesus love for him.

That is how it will be when Jesus awakens you from death. He will call your name and you will awake from the sleep of death – not because you have faith – not because you did enough good deeds or gave enough money or lived a worthy life. You will enter into life eternal because Jesus loves you.

I remember a story about Sue's dad. Sam was a great preacher. Back in the days when I was west of the Mississippi so many times I would meet people in Iowa or Colorado or North Dakota and I would discover they knew Sam and always I would hear about what a great guy he was. He was a faithful pastor – he had a deep faith as far as I could tell. But Sam fell victim to Alzheimer's. Sam who delighted in leading the family in prayer came to a point

where he did not seem to know anything at all about God. I am told one evening at supper with other family members around the table Ann, Sue's mom, asked Sam what he was thinking about? "Sex" was his one word answer.

We can laugh about that because it was so unlike him. Sam had lost power over himself and he no longer could claim to have faith. But we all have hope for him because of Jesus love for him. Our faith is in Jesus.

Whenever I conduct a funeral no matter who the person is that has died, I preach the same sermon. I declare the one thing I can know for sure – the love of Jesus for this one. She may have been a gossip and a troublemaker or a dedicated church worker. He may have never stepped into a church or spoken a unkind word about anyone. The fruit of the Spirit, love joy peace patience kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control may have been evident a whole life through or not at all, but one message can be proclaimed without doubt – the love of Jesus for this one.

That is what I am here to tell you this day, because Jesus loves you, died for you and was raised for you, you will live eternally with God. Believe that with all of your heart – it is true. Jesus love for you will save you. Amen.