

# **“In God’s Safe Keeping”**

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Today’s message comes from the book of John, chapter 11, verses 32 through 44. When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. He asked, “Where have you laid him?”

They replied, “Lord, come and see.”

Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, “See how much he loved him!” But some of them said, “He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?” Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, “Lord, the smell will be awful! He’s been dead four days.”

Jesus replied, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believe, you will see God’s glory?” So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me.” Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Untie him and let him go.”

This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God. Lord comfort and bring peace to every heart that grieves today. Pour down your care and guard like a shield. Let your arms surround and wrap each and every heart and mind. Bring a strong sense of your personal and intimate presence. Amen.

Death is real and harsh. The physical recovery of Lazarus' body from the dead in this passage doesn't sentimentalize or simplify the harsh reality of what our loss feels like. The truth and the experience of the death of a loved one is cruel and unforgiving.

We as a nation suffer loss when a national tragedy occurs. For those who have suffered loss, it may bring back experiences that were painful. It's almost as though the loss of other lives causes the resurfacing of other pain. The hurt we feel is penetrating and deep. Death *wounds* us forever.

When death comes into our lives and visits us many want to blame someone. We're numb and angry. In the text that was read, that's how Mary felt when she accused Jesus and said, ". . . if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." Jesus was weeping about what happened. He was angry too. Verse 33 says he was "deeply disturbed and troubled." In verse 38, the passage states again that he was ". . . deeply disturbed." It's as if there's a stirring up of anger within him that hates the effects of death and grief. There's a horrifying reaction people have to loss, and it affects ones entire self . . . . . body, soul, and spirit.

In the passage we read, Jesus turns the grief to faith and says, "Remove the stone . . . didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me." Then Jesus shouts with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth.

Before Lazarus came out of the cave there's nothing but despair! Now there's nothing but faith and hope as Lazarus comes out of the cave! Many of the Jews who were present believed in Jesus after that. For some faith is born, but for others hatred is stirred up, and they plan to put Jesus to death.

Jesus was angry and wept because of the death of Lazarus. Psalm 116:15 says this about the saints. “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” God’s heart broke when Lazarus died; it grieved God—that must be why the church sets apart a day to honor and remember the saints who have passed on.

Some may reminisce, but the church holds a ceremony. As Christians we believe that victory over the grave has already been secured for us by Christ. The victory is complete and those who have passed are with God and alive. God calls us all saints, but what is a saint anyway? Literally the word means “holy ones.” The apostle Paul called the Christians in the city of Corinth saints. You may remember what was going in that city. Some were participating in all kinds of immoral behavior and others were fighting. And Paul declares them holy?!

God is more interested in our direction in moving toward him than our perfection. Are we growing and maturing as a Christian disciple? Are we allowing ourselves to be transformed? Are we loving more and forgiving easier?

It’s not *our* works that get us to heaven. It’s the work of Christ. It’s not what we’ve done or haven’t done, it’s the blood of Christ and faith in the power of Christ. If it were about us—we’d be sunk. *God declares us holy*, and because of that, we have a place with God in eternity and all those who have died.

In a book titled *Reconstructing Christianity*, Rich Mayfield quotes Robert Louis Stevenson and gives a definition of the word saint. Stevenson says “The saints are the sinners who keep on going.” What could be more comforting than that?

So through all of our suffering and pain in life there is a word of hope. Hope as we go through any kind of loss is welcome, but all loss is traumatic—the loss of a loved one and learning how to live again without that person, the loss of a career, divorce, personal injury, surgery, children leaving home, and on and on.

We have hope and know that Christ walks with us through these dark valleys and difficult times. And we can have assurance and great encouragement that our loved ones are safe in God's keeping. But until we meet with them in the next life, it's helpful to remember what Jeremiah has to say in the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter verse 11. "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

Let's pray. Compassionate God of all comfort, comfort us in all our trouble—like a strong anchor and refuge we run into in a time of chaos. Help us to be comforted. Remind us of the comfort and peace you've brought us, so we can bring that same comfort to others. "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit." Amen.