

Romans 15.1-7, 14; John 11.17-27
Funeral Sermon of + Deaconess Linda Sue Kinnett +
17 September 2021
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

Beloved in the Lord, friends and extended family of Linda and Clayton, gathered saints of St. John's and of Christ's Church wherever it may be found, and especially you, Clayton, Elizabeth and Ben, Joe, Jessica, and Rachel: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be, was it?

They were supposed to live a good long time. The man of the family, well, taking care of the family.

And it could have turned out different. It really could have. We all know that.

But instead, death, that great sundering of soul and body, did what it does best, did the only thing it knows how to do. Death, this great "gift" of Satan in the Fall to destroy the best of God's creation, man, and all the ordinances of God that make man's life blessed.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Instead, it was supposed to have been time, a long, long time, spent with family. Time and more time spent in the service of Jesus, the Divine Friend of all men. Time and more time with Jesus as Guest in the household by His Word.

And frankly, Jesus could have done something about it. He's God, after all. The prayers and petitions went up. Jesus was sought. For how many days? It's unimportant. But it wasn't just the family who besought Jesus. It was everyone. For their beloved friend, this pillar of the community, lay ill. Deathly ill.

But the silence of Jesus was deafening. It always is. Ask the Syrophenician woman. Ask the disciples as they rode out the storm in a skiff on the wind-tossed Sea of Galilee.

Of course, you don't need to ask anyone. You've all experienced the silence of God. Your prayers and supplications grow all the more fervent as they shout into that abyss from which there comes no answer—or at least not the answer you want. All the more frantic as what happens on earth seems to be occluded from the divine view in heaven. Maybe you even feel as if God has been silent most recently.

Martha did, too. We didn't read it today, but just a handful of verses earlier, if we had read it, Martha and her sister Mary had sent to the Lord Jesus an urgent word, an urgent petition, an urgent supplication. And it begged an answer. Their dear brother Lazarus was ill. Deathly ill.

That's a funny thing, "deathly ill." Not sure exactly how we humans know it. It's almost intuitive. It's not pessimism, exactly. It's just a gut sense of where things are going. I wonder how many guts fell to the soles of our feet in these last weeks as we first learned of Linda's illness, then of her hospitalization. Clayton, if it were possible for your gut to fall through your feet, I'm sure yours would have sunk to the core of planet Earth when you got the phone call from the hospital in the wee hours of Sunday. Linda wasn't just ill. She was deathly ill. She was going to die. Nothing more to be done for her.

When that happens you find yourself without words. You have none of your own. And you turn to the Scriptures. Out of the depths I cry to You, O LORD. O Lord, hear my voice. Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy. O LORD, You keep my eyelids open. I am so

troubled I cannot speak. And maybe all you can muster is the simplest prayer of all: Lord, have mercy. Lord, help.

Well, that didn't help out those sisters too much, did it? And it didn't help out in the pavilion at Stormont, either.

Lazarus died. Linda died.

And Jesus—He stayed away from it all. Not even the courtesy of a, “Gotcher message. Be there soon.” And the silence was ... deafening.

All the more deafening because—shouldn't God care about this? Shouldn't Jesus care about this? It's ridiculous! Through Baptism the Lord places all who belong to Him in a lifelong pitched battle against Satan, for in Baptism He promises to undo all the works of Satan. The sin afflicted on humanity by Satan? Drowned and buried with Christ. Death—the crowning glory and work of Satan? Undone by Christ's resurrection. For we were buried with Him by Baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we, too, might walk in newness of life. Christ's life my life. Christ's life your life. Christ's life Lazarus' life.

Christ's life Linda's life. And eternal life—the very opposite of the sin and death and hell that all those in Satan's thrall must suffer? That, too, made over to every baptized believer.

So shouldn't God care? Shouldn't Jesus care? It's like conceding defeat to a mortal enemy when you've already got the upper hand. Who does that? It's like the field marshal has mustered his troops into hot battle and himself walked off the battlefield.

That's what it seemed like to Martha. For all she could see, the field marshal had slinked away from the battle. And when He showed back up, it's as if the whole army committed to His leadership and care lay strewn, dead, across the battlefield.

Or at least Lazarus was dead.

You know, we Christians have this weird idea that we can't get upset with God, or shouldn't. But that's a silly notion. If Jesus is real. If Jesus is personal and a person. If Jesus has befriended you in your Baptism, if He speaks to you as Friend in His Word, if He hosts you as His guests at His meal—then in many ways He's just like any other friend. He's your Familiar. He's your Companion. And in fact He wants to be your Friend and Brother. Which means that you can't only treat Him like one, He *wants* to be treated like one.

That's just what Martha did. To whom else besides a friend would you have sharp words of rebuke when their loyalty seems to fail? When you summon and they don't answer? You're still FB friends, but when you message them with appalling news, they ignore it. What does a friend do then? You certainly don't ignore it. You confront it.

And that's just what Martha did. She confronted Jesus: Lord, if only You had been here! Jesus, we called for You got the message. You dilly-dallied two days. And then You took Your sweet time getting here. And now—now, it's too late. Lazarus is dead!

Beloved in the Lord, and especially you, Clayton, in your disappointment over the radio silence. In your disappointment that field marshal has led His army to battle and then fled. In your

disappointment that Jesus has tarried—it's not tough to feel like Martha. Lord, if only You had been here!

But do not be deceived. Do not be daunted. For Jesus is a God who snatches victory from the jaws of defeat. The ancient church fathers often spoke of His death by crucifixion as a worm on a fishing hook. In this image, Satan's a fish. He sees the worm. He sees Jesus, for He is a worm, and not a man. And desperate to devour Him and be done with Him once and for all, he snaps at bait. Swallows it down hook and all. Only to find that the hook has been lodged deep in his throat. And it's over. Done with. The apparent victor turned into the victim; the Victim victorious in the apparent victory of the apparent victor.

For Jesus—just as He says—is the Resurrection and the Life. The hook lodged in his gullet is the death of Satan. The death of sin. The death of death itself. To raise up all mankind from death in resurrection, He must die in order Himself to be raised up. To give all mankind life that has been lost and to be the life of all mankind, He must forfeit His. But He does this all—He forfeits life, He succumbs to death—only in the way that the worm catches the fish and takes captive its prey.

And so that pattern—death first, then life; victimhood then victory—that pattern Jesus makes the pattern of all who are in Him. You heard it at the start of the service: we were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead we too might walk in newness of life. In newness of life that does not end. In the newness of life that begins with a drowning and continues in the presence of Jesus through this life, through death, through eternal life.

And guess what that means: it means that in Christ death is not death. It is a sleep. That's what Jesus told the disciples when He said, "Giddy up. We're going back to Bethany and I'm going to wake Lazarus up."

They didn't get it. They thought Lazarus had literally fallen asleep. Like you're going to do tonight when you go home. Or like a sick person might pass his days in slumber.

But that wasn't it at all. They could have looked high and low in the house of Martha and Mary and Lazarus, in every bed they had, and then gone to the neighbors and done the same. And they wouldn't have found Lazarus.

For Lazarus had died.

But in Christ, this worm on the hook, this Victim turned Victor, this Resurrection, this Life—in Him the death that Lazarus had died was nothing more than a sleep. Luther makes such a great quip about this. He says that Christians sleep more lightly in their graves than they do with the blackout curtains pulled tied.

Because when the Lord Jesus returns, the Victim now victorious, in all His glory, and all the angels with Him, He's gonna stand over Linda's grave and say to her just what He said to Lazarus. Just one word in Greek: δεῦρο—come forth! Lazarus, come forth! Linda, come forth!

And just as easily as Lazarus sprang up, just as easily as the widow's son at Nain sat up on his funeral bier and began to speak, just as easily as Jairus' little daughter used Jesus' hand to sit up and then stand up and go out and play—just that easily will Linda arise from her grave, the Lord's creation in her stitched back together, soul rejoined to glorified body. That's how light

her sleep in Jesus. Clayton, not sure if you ever had to shake her awake. Or tough it was in the depth of her slumber to stir her. But it won't be anything like that. With just a word. A simple word, "Linda, come forth," she'll rise like she's gotten up from a power nap. Left behind all the ills and ailment and anxieties that accompanied her when she fell asleep. For in her grave will be left what belongs there—exactly what Christ left behind in His grave—all sins and death.

Because that's how it's supposed to be. The Syrophenician got crumbs from the master's table. Martha and Mary, those two sisters of Lazarus, got their brother back—alive. For God's silence that seems to you like an eternity is broken by His eternal word. A word more comforting and powerful than any consolatory word: come forth and live! Live forever!

As silent as God may have seemed these past weeks, nothing could be further from the truth, could it? It's just that you didn't hear it straight from His mouth—but through the means He appointed to deliver it, through His Holy Scriptures.

I want everyone to know that Linda herself chose the readings for today. And I think she had message she wanted to convey to you—what I've already said, for sure. But also this, from the epistle: "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope ... that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.... I myself am satisfied about you, brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge *and able to instruct one another.*"

Brothers and sisters in Christ: you yourselves are full of the same goodness, God-wrought goodness, the deposit of the Faith. You yourselves are filled with all knowledge, the knowledge

that in Christ God has defeated death. And brothers and sisters in Christ, you are able to instruct one another.

This might be “the” funeral sermon for Linda. But there are many more to be preached. God’s not silent. He speaks through you when you handle His word. That’s the Pentecost business of “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.” For God’s word is not far off. “It is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.” My sermon’s done. The sermons that still need to be preached aren’t. And they’re yours to preach. That’s your job: to comfort one another over our sister in Christ, who has fallen asleep. And to confess with your mouth, just as faithfully as our dear deaconess did among you, that Jesus is Lord, and that God raised Him from the dead. For by this you will be saved. And by this—and this alone—will you bring comfort and consolation to all who hear you, that they, too, may be saved.

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

jsb
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