

Mortal Combat: Jesus vs. Death, Round One

John 11:17-27,38-45 (NIV)

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." ³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Jesus, God in mortal flesh and blood, has taken on significant opponents already through our Lenten series. On Ash Wednesday, Jesus defeated our pride, showing us that our sins are bad enough that we will die for them. He won that battle for us by taking away our sins and creating in us a new and pure heart, just as he did for King David. In the battle against temptations from the devil, Adam lost, and we followed in his losing pattern, but Jesus went round after round with the devil and defeated every temptation for us to give us his victory. With Nicodemus, Jesus kept working with him to defeat his ignorance and show him instead a born again life, one that sees the Son of Man, Jesus, lifted up on a cross that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. We saw Jesus battle cultural divides with the Samaritan woman by providing a universal need: himself as the living water that wells up to eternal life. When people saw a man born blind and assumed he's getting this bad thing for his or his parent's sin, we instead had our eyes opened to see the works of God displayed in his life as well as in Timmy Short's and our own since we have seen the Light of Life, Jesus. These mortal combats have been gearing us up for the fight we encounter today: Jesus vs. Death.

In the verses preceding our Gospel reading today, we learn a few important facts to help set the stage for this combat. Jesus has some good friends: Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. The sisters send a message to Jesus telling him that the one you love, Lazarus, is sick. Jesus tells his disciples that he's not going yet. In fact, Jesus delays so long that by the time he gets to Mary and Martha, Lazarus has already been dead and buried for 4 days.

Upon his arrival, Martha went out to meet Jesus and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (verse 21) Maybe I should take her words more kindly, but right away it seems like Martha is throwing a punch at Jesus' face. "If you had been here" blatantly reminds him that he was not there for them in their time of need. Yes, there's also faith expressed with these words, faith that Jesus had the power to fix this, but it also maybe passive aggressively accuses: You could have prevented this!

Martha's first punch is followed by another possible subtle jab: "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." (verse 22) Again, there's an expression of Martha's faith that Jesus can do something amazing, but it also can show that she feels a bit defeated that her prayers were not heard, that God didn't give her what she asked for. Maybe she thinks that she doesn't have the same kind of communication line as Jesus does, that her prayers aren't effective, aren't worth being offered.

When have you found yourself throwing punches like these at God? When have you felt like God was not there for you in a time of need? Was it when your brother died? Or your Mom? your Dad? Your husband? Your wife? Your son? Your daughter? Your grandbaby? You threw the punches at God because your prayers were offered but not answered. You have felt the pain and said, maybe out loud or in your heart, "Lord, if you had been here..." because you weren't.

Let's just stop for a minute and not jump to the end of this fight and acknowledge how hard it is to have that feeling as if God is distant from you, not listening to your prayers or not willing to answer them. Death and grief show us that we're not in control, and that we can't instantly fix things either with words or actions. We are powerless in this fight against death.

Now, acknowledging that going through the death of a loved one is hard, let's talk about feeling as if God wasn't there for you, as if he doesn't answer your prayers. Is it that actually true? Had God refused to be there to help Martha and Mary and Lazarus? He had healed the man who was born blind. So, surely Jesus could make sick Lazarus better. Was he ignoring them? Did he fail them? Is that why Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb?

In the moment, we can and do feel abandoned by God and not listened to, not acknowledged, not helped. But this fight of Jesus vs. death is recorded so that we can see the fight play out, so that we can know what the truth is, to know that he really is still with us through grief and is still listening and answering our prayers. Let's watch the fight.

Martha (and Mary) felt that Jesus was not there for them when they needed him, that their prayers were ignored or not heard at all. Is that the truth? Yes, they believed that Jesus had the power to cure Lazarus. They had seen his healings many times before. This is why they reached out to him. But Jesus purposefully delayed in coming, even with their request, even with his power. He did this to show Martha and Mary something greater. He got them ready for it when he tells Martha, "Your brother will rise again." (verse 23) Martha wasn't thinking that this was going to happen that day, but on the last day, at the end of the world.

Jesus gets her refocused when he said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (verses 25-26) Jesus asked Martha if she believed this so that she could take ownership of this belief, of this amazing truth, prepping her for what he's about to do.

Then Jesus goes to the tomb as the ultimate champion fighter of death. If anyone can defeat death, it has to be this guy called the resurrection and the life. And he commands that the stone to Lazarus' tomb be rolled away. Martha objects. She doesn't want to see or smell her dead brother. In her mind, death has still won, still has victory over Lazarus, over their lives. Jesus encourages her again to see him as the resurrection, as the life. He prays out loud to God the Father so that no one can mistake what's about to happen. After praying, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (verse 43) With three simple words, "the dead man came out." (verse 44) Lazarus was alive! Death lost. The resurrection and the life beat him, just with words! Against death, Jesus wins!

With this victory, God showed that he hadn't abandoned Martha or Mary or Lazarus or us. He knew their pain, even as he himself wept. He heard their prayers but wanted them to see a greater victory. After people saw Jesus' knockout of Lazarus' death, we're told: "Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him." (verse 45) By waiting, by not being there physically before Lazarus died, people saw Jesus defeat death with three little words. They believed that he actually is the resurrection and the life, the one who would defeat death for them.

You and I have that same God in flesh and blood, one who crossed into this culture of death, our culture. He has defeated the devil and his temptations for us. He has created in us new and pure hearts, made us born again, brought us into his family, that with just his Word, the message of who he is and what he has done for us. God has brought you and me from spiritual death to spiritual life. Against both physical and spiritual death, Jesus wins!

This means that even when death comes into your life, you have a God who is, in fact, with you through it and is listening to every desperate plea for help and healing, even when you can't feel it or can't see it. Since the truth is that God is doing these things, then, when our feelings say that he's not, we realize that our feelings are lying to us, being false prophets steering us away from God.

Because our feelings during grief can lie to us saying that God is not with us, not listening to us, that he is not for us, we need to come alongside people who are grieving and show them our champion who is the resurrection and the life. Will you come alongside a grieving friend or relative to show them this? Can you come alongside other people of our community by helping facilitate our 13 week grief support group called GreifShare? We can help people see that God does not abandon us in the fight against death, but that instead he is with us, he hears us, and he defeats death with just his words! Will you show people that Jesus wins against death?

This victory of Jesus over death is a great one, a needed one for us and others to see, but we're not done with death. This was round one. Round two is coming. Mortal combat continues as Lent continues. Get ready to see the final showdown between Jesus and his own death. Spoiler alert: we already know the outcome. Jesus still wins, for you and me, because he is our champion, the resurrection and the life. Amen.