



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 5

March 22, 2026

If Only You Had Been Here

John 11:17–27, 38–53

¹⁷ So when Jesus came, He found that [Lazarus] had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. ¹⁹ And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.

²⁰ Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. ²¹ Now Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.”

²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. ²⁶ And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

²⁷ She said to Him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

³⁸ Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.”

Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.”

⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me.

⁴² And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.” ⁴³ Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!” ⁴⁴ And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Loose him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went away to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus did. ⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.”

⁴⁹ And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for



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the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.”⁵¹ Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation,⁵² and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.

⁵³ Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death.

"If only you had been here..." How many times do you hear that in the movies when the hero shows up just a little too late to save the day? "If you'd just gotten here five minutes earlier!" Surely, rescue workers have heard that plenty of times. And doctors: "You should have checked him more regularly, then you could have diagnosed the cancer in time to treat it." "If only we'd used this or that medication or gotten a second opinion..." then the grip of death would have been broken, the hands on the clock turned back. "But now, it's too late." "If only God *cared* more about us, about *me* – cared enough to move things around a bit... change this or that circumstance... – then my tragedy could have been avoided."

Beloved, this is risky thinking. It can lead people to the conclusion that God isn't doing everything He's supposed to, when, in actuality, nothing could be further from the truth. Please don't pray, like Mary and Martha: "Lord, if only You had been here my brother would not have died," but, rather, say, as Martha did later on: "But even now I know..." God grant that we can learn to make that confession – the confession of all who know that Jesus is never too late.

It certainly seemed like He was too late for Lazarus, didn't it. I mean, he was dead. The home of these beloved friends of Jesus was not immune to tragedy and death. And neither are your homes – you, who boldly confess the Christian faith.

Lazarus died – in spite of every effort, even in spite of an appeal made to Jesus, who loved him and his sisters far more than they could've loved Him. And isn't it true today? We operate and medicate, and most of all, we pray ... but, in the end, we find that the grave awaits us all, leaving us naked and helpless, questioning God's wisdom and power, feeling the emptiness of human comfort, our hearts having been crushed.

What was behind this tragedy at Bethany, a tragedy that repeats itself in our lives today, this death of one whom Jesus loved – a believer in Him as the Messiah, the Anointed Savior? Scripture calls death a wage, the well-deserved paycheck we ultimately receive for our service to sin. And we work hard, don't we? We put in a full week, with plenty of overtime! But, even if we were to serve sin only for a moment, a second, a twinkling of an eye, we'd still deserve the full wage. If we're not absolutely, perfectly, engaged in the praise and service of our Lord every minute of every day, we earn this dread reward, because God's Word is clear – we must worship Him always. But let's be honest: even our best worship and praise is tainted with sin, and therefore worthless before



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Him.

It was sin – sin and its deadly work – sin so often discounted and disregarded – sin that finally claimed the life of Lazarus, the friend of our Lord, whose death brought tears to Jesus' eyes – eyes so sensitive to our needs, so sensitive to the insult that this sin-caused tragedy was to the glory of God.

So, why was this allowed to happen? Why was Jesus "late"? Why didn't He save His friend from dying? For that matter, why hasn't He removed death from us today? Would it offend you if I told that Jesus did this on purpose? That's what John says! But why? Why would Jesus allow His friends to suffer like that? "Because," John writes, "He loved them"! "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So...when He heard that [Lazarus] was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was. Then after this He said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again'" (John 11:5-7). So this is how Jesus answers prayer? After He had already given the promise that "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (11:3-4)?

What kind of cruel trick is *this*? Jesus promises recovery, but now there's a *loss*? And this is someone He loves! Nevertheless, He comes to Bethany, having promised that Lazarus' sickness would not end in death, declaring that instead the glory of God would be revealed in His Son. But here's the thing: He does way more than just raise His friend from the dead: He completely frees not only Lazarus, but Martha and Mary and all of us, from the power of death, now and forever.

Listen: there's a two-fold lesson for us here. And it's the same lesson Martha learned that day: Jesus is never "too late," and as He told her once before, "There is only one thing needful"! Jesus is right on time to declare His glory and strengthen Martha's faith. She had said: "Lord, if only You had been here, my brother would not be dead...yet even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you." In other words, "Yes, I still believe that You are the Messiah, but I really wish You would've been here; yes, I believe that God is with You; I just wish You had been with us!"

So you can see: her faith is not complete; it's a faith that confesses Jesus as Lord over the living, but isn't ready to accept His being Lord over the dead. "Your brother will rise again," Jesus said. "I know that He will rise again . . . in the resurrection at the last day." "No, Martha; don't you see? I *am* the resurrection and the life! The resurrection at the last day doesn't just 'happen' – it happens because of Me! He who believes in Me, even though he were dead, yet shall he live; and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die! Martha...even as we speak, Lazarus is alive! It's not breath in the body that's needful, it's *Me* – I'm the one and only thing you need to live!"

"Do you believe this?" He asked. And it was clear that the lesson had been learned: the Son of God, had spoken, and His Word must be heard. "Yes, Lord...because I believe You are the Christ, I believe this is so. You were not too late; though my brother has been



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dead to me, he remains alive to God, because You are His life."

Jesus then proved that what He said was true. And God was glorified in the work of His Son – not only in the miracle of raising Lazarus, but, even more, in the developed trust that the Spirit grants through His Word, a trust that goes beyond believing who He is because of what He can do before our eyes, but now includes believing what He's doing that we can't see.

Beloved, Jesus is never too late. We may be too late; we may remain in our sin, reject Christ and refuse to listen to Him, until we finally have to face Him as our eternal Judge. Then it will be too late for us. But He's never too late. He always has the situation under control and in His all-powerful hand. He knows what He's doing, and He teaches us in today's Gospel to believe that everything He does is to His glory – which can only be to His Church's good, and, therefore to your good as well, because, just like Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, He loves you. And you know that, because while you wait "unseeing," He assures you of it through His own body and blood that He left as a promise of His ongoing love.

Jesus came to bring help that was far greater than healing the sick, far greater than raising the dead; He came to free you and me completely from the power of death, because He came to free us from our sin. As it is written: "'O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?'" The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Having died and risen from the grave, He is indeed the Resurrection and the Life for you.

Now, I don't mean to discourage you from praying that the Lord will step into your trials and free you from them. But, as you do, remember that if you don't see Him doing what you think He ought to, it doesn't mean that He's disowned you or that He'll be "too late"; He's with you even when you don't see Him – He is your life, even in death, because in Him, you will live forever. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen