

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on April 2, 2017	On the occasion of the Fifth Sunday of Lent, A

John 11:1-45

### Hope Beyond All Hope

You have heard me preach from this pulpit again and again that it is our job as followers of Jesus to incarnate the love of God that he came to show us. I have said in many different ways that we are to be Jesus' hands and feet in the world, feeding the hungry, helping the poor, protecting those who have no one to protect them. That is our sacred duty and our privilege, to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ to the world by word and deed. And that is exactly right. That is our duty. That is our privilege. That is our calling.

As the Body of Christ, we do represent him in the world. We are ambassadors for Christ. We do reach out to the world in love and caring. We also take care of one another. After all, "they will know we are disciples [of Christ] because we have love for one another." That is indeed the good news. But... you know as well as I do that we all fall short. We all fail to follow the commandments of God. We all fail to live lives worthy of repentance. Sooner or later we all choose our own comfort and safety over the well-being of another. Sooner or later we all take the easy road rather than the straight and narrow way. Sooner or later we all get lazy, or sloppy, or careless. We let our guard down. We get distracted. We mess up. We try to be Christ to the world, but we end up being just another sinner in a world full of sinners.

When we do that, we let people down, just as others have let us down. That's where we are. That's the world we live in. We look to one another for help and support. We search for God in the people God places in our lives, but we are inevitably let down.

Jesus let his friends down. Mary and Martha were hoping he would come and save their brother Lazarus who was deathly ill. They were counting on it. They had seen Jesus heal so

many others, strangers, and they figured he would certainly arrive in the nick of time for their brother's sake. After all Jesus loved them and their brother. But he didn't get there. Jesus didn't arrive to save him, so Lazarus died. Lazarus died and they laid him in his tomb and mourned him. When Jesus did finally arrive, four days later, Martha seemed angry, and Mary was distraught. Both of them expressed their frustration in exactly the same words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Damning words from disappointed sisters.

Yet Jesus had a different plan. He had told his disciples even before they returned to Bethany that Lazarus' illness was really to reveal God's glory. It must have been hard to see at this point how this set of circumstances would glorify God. Lazarus was dead and buried. Mary and Martha were beside themselves with grief. Friends had gathered to console them. The situation seemed hopeless. If Jesus had been just any other person, this situation would have been hopeless. If it were you or me, the only thing we could have done would be to weep along with everybody else.

Jesus, of course, does what he seemed to have planned all along. He goes to the tomb, asks them to remove the stone, and calls to Lazarus to come out. When Lazarus comes staggering to the mouth of the tomb, Jesus commands that they unbind him, remove the shroud of death that holds him back and let him go.

Any time we look to each other for our salvation we will be frustrated. No one on this earth can fulfill all that we need all the time. Even our closest friends will disappoint us, or even turn against us. Thankfully, our source of hope is no earthly person or power. Thankfully, God has provided his own Son to be for us not just an example of how we should be, but our redeemer and savior as well. When we face a dire situation, and all seems dark, the knight in shining armor may not arrive. We may be overcome by the challenges and problems we face in

life. We may well feel like we are beyond all hope. But the Good News is that we never are. Not even the worst thing that could happen to us can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Not death. Not pain. Not the loss of someone we love. Not disappointment. Not evil perpetrated against us. Not suffering. Not anything in all creation. Our hope does not come from any power of this world; therefore we need not fear any power of this world. If we had to depend on ourselves, or our family or friends, we would be lost. God, the creator of the universe, has given us the victory through his Son. God has breathed new life into us through his Holy Spirit. God has defeated every evil, even the sin that binds us and holds us back. Jesus has set us free!

We *are* the Body of Christ, and we *are* responsible for incarnating the love of God in the world today, but we do it only by the power of God's Holy Spirit, who lives in us. It is not dependent upon us. Thank God for that, huh? We are sinners who have been redeemed from sin, set free from the effects of sin, set free from death, and sorrow, and pain. That is our hope, and we are never without hope. Don't ever let each other forget that. We are never without hope. Jesus himself is our hope, and he will never leave us, or abandon us.

Amen.