

5th SUNDAY OF LENT – A (March 26, 2023)

Today we hear the last and most dramatic of the three long passages from John's gospel given to us in this Lenten season: Jesus brings his dead friend Lazarus back to life. He told Martha that he is the resurrection and the life; in raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus showed beyond doubt that he meant what he said. And this gospel sets the stage the solemn commemoration of Jesus' passion and death that will begin next Sunday with Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

All three readings today set the stage for that most solemn of all weeks in the Church year. They force us to confront the ultimate mystery that we face in this earthly life of ours: the mystery of death, and they remind us of a most important truth: that death, though all too real, does not have the last word. In the first reading, we heard God promise through the prophet Ezekiel that he will raise his people from their graves and put his spirit of life into them. "I have promised, and I will do it" says the Lord—and so he will. In the second reading, St. Paul promises that if God's spirit dwells in us, then the one who raised Jesus from the dead will also give new life to our mortal bodies as well. And again from the gospel, Jesus not only declared himself the resurrection and the life: he proved it by raising Lazarus from the dead.

But still we fear death; we rage against its apparent power to take from us those we love, and we are afraid to confront the fact that it will one day claim us as well. Our own culture does not seem to know how to handle death very well, does it? We don't like the word itself, and so we speak of someone 'passing' or 'passing away' instead of saying simply that someone died. We try to hide those gray hairs and other visible signs of aging—maybe trying to pretend we are not getting older and therefore not getting closer to our own death. No, it's not wrong to say or do such things. But if we do so from a reluctance or refusal to confront the reality of death, then we are not being really honest with ourselves, are we? We need not and should not be morbidly obsessed by these things—that is not healthy. But we can't ignore the fact that we will all face it.

This gospel is in fact the perfect response to whatever fears or reluctance we may have in thinking about death. First of all, John lets us know that Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary were deeply grieved by his death—and well they should be. We grieve, we mourn the death of our loved ones; how could we not do so? In fact, John gives us a very important detail in this passage in what is the shortest verse in the entire Bible: "And Jesus wept." If Jesus could shed tears of sorrow over the death of his dear friend, why in heaven's name should we not do so? As I have told many people over the years, God gave us tear ducts for a reason. Don't ever be afraid or ashamed to use them whether you are man or woman, young or old—they are an important way for us to express outwardly the sorrow and grief we feel inwardly.

But the good and great news is that death—though very real—is not the end of our story, it is not the ultimate reality. That is exactly why God the Son became one of us in Jesus: to prove the ultimate futility of death by the power of his words and deeds. Who can doubt this after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead...and even more so after his own rising from the dead? There is a very important snippet of dialogue between Jesus and Martha in this gospel. Martha had expressed her belief in the resurrection on the last day; Jesus then declared himself the

resurrection and the life and that whoever believes in him, even if he dies, will live. Then comes Jesus' question: "do you believe this?" Martha answered with a firm 'yes', she did believe.

Do we believe it? Jesus' question is addressed not only to Martha, but to each of us as well. We do not have to pretend that death is an easy or trivial thing to confront—it isn't for us, and it surely wasn't easy or trivial for Jesus. But he has won the battle—that is the good news, it's the heart of the gospel. Lazarus, though brought back to earthly life, ultimately died the death every one of us will face. But he and all of us have the well-founded and well-grounded hope that Jesus' complete power over death will raise us to eternal life and a perfect joy that will never, ever end.

Do we believe this? We have no reason at all to doubt it. Jesus has already demonstrated beyond doubt his power over death and his desire to work that power for us. Though we are saddened by death, though we are grateful for the blessings of this earthly life and we do our best to preserve that life, we ultimately have nothing to fear from death. Jesus has already won the victory for us. He simply asks our belief and faith in him and our resolve to follow him in grateful love and into eternal life when our earthly life has come to its completion; in other words, when we die.