



Fifth Sunday of Lent



Ezek. 37:12-14 • Rom. 8:8-11 • John 11:1-45

We hear the story of the raising of Lazarus from the perspective of Martha and Mary and the Disciples, but what would it have been like to be Lazarus—to be sealed in a tomb for four days, in complete darkness, total silence, to be dead; to have no bodily sensation, to be without life, without future, without hope? And then, out of the darkness, out of the silence, to hear

a sound. He would not have heard the deep rumble of the stone as it was being rolled away beforehand—after all, he was dead. The first sound he would have heard was his name. In the midst of the darkness and emptiness, out of the void, his name: “Lazarus!” Our name is our identity; it is how other people know us, it is how we know ourselves. It is his name being spoken—in fact, being shouted—that calls Lazarus back to his life. It gives him back his identity, summons him out of the tomb in which he has been sealed, out of the darkness. It calls him to live again.

As we’ve heard these Sundays of Lent, the Gospel stories invite us to recognize the meaning and power of our baptism. We have heard how baptism is life-giving water that is poured into our hearts, flowing into those parched and lifeless areas of our lives, satisfying our deepest thirst. It heals our blindness and opens our eyes and hearts and minds so we can see ourselves, and others, and God, differently—to see as God sees. And today we heard that baptism calls us out of those places in our lives that are dead, lifeless and without hope. It restores our life, our identity, our future. It is a resurrection to a new life.

Remember that the early Christians understood baptism as dying. Today we tend to prefer the metaphor of washing—it’s less offensive, especially when most of our baptisms involve infants. But St. Paul wrote in the Book of Romans, “Do you not know that in baptism you died with Christ and were buried with him?” This is a message adults need to hear. The commitment of baptism is a commitment to the way of Jesus, to take up his cross, die to ourselves and follow him. In fact, early Christians sometimes referred to baptism as the “First Death.” The Second Death was physical dying, which the Book of Revelation tells us, has no power over those who have experienced the First Death. If we die to ourselves in this life, there is nothing to fear. St. Paul also writes, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

Lazarus has experienced the First Death. That explains why Jesus is not overly concerned at the beginning of the story. But the disciples and Lazarus’ sisters do not yet understand the full mystery, the full power of baptism, and this is evident in Martha’s conversation with Jesus when he finally comes to their home. Understandably, she is hurt by Jesus’ seeming lack of concern and his delay in responding to her earlier message. She says, somewhat accusingly, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Jesus responds with the simple statement, “Your brother will rise again.”

Then, even more accusingly, Martha says: “I know he will rise again on the last day.” In effect, she is saying, “Yes, I know he will rise at the end of time. But I am hurting here and now. Eternity is a long way off. What about the present? What about this life?”

Jesus gives a cryptic answer. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me and dies, shall live.”

The key to Jesus’ response are the words, “I am.” Jesus does not say, “I *will be* the resurrection,” but “I *am* the resurrection.” Baptism is not merely a promise that we will rise on the last day, that we will go to heaven when we die. Baptism is a resurrection *today*, here and now, in the present. In baptism we are called forth from the tombs of our lives where we are dead and lifeless and without hope—here and now, to follow Jesus here and now.

In Aramaic, the name Lazarus means, “the One Whom God Loves.” As with the Woman at the Well and the Man Born Blind, Lazarus symbolizes each one of us. We are all Lazarus, the One Whom God Loves. And yet each of us has places in our lives that are dead, dark, hopelessness and full of despair. We have all come to dead ends in our lives: relationships that have failed; addictions that cannot be overcome; sin that cannot be conquered. We may live in the darkness of depression or fear, or be bound by bitterness and anger or anxiety. We are not able to escape the mistakes or failures of our past, or we may find our lives shaped by the mistakes and sins of others.

Christ did not come to tell us to suffer through this life so that we will be rewarded after we die by getting to heaven. “I *am* the resurrection,” he says—here and now. “I came that they might have life,” he tells us—here and now. The power of God that has been poured into our hearts in the First Death of baptism does not lay dormant until the Second Death. It calls to us in the tombs where we are enduring death right now; it calls us to come forth to experience the fullness of life.

And so Jesus goes to the tomb and stands before it, and simply calls out the dead man’s name: “Lazarus!” Jesus says to him: “Remember who you are! The One Who Is Loved by God! That is your name, your deepest identity. Your life is not determined by your failure, your sin, your struggles. You cannot be defined by the sins and mistakes of others. You died to all those things in baptism; that life was immersed in the infinite love of God. Come forth to your new life!” And the dead man came forth.

But Jesus has one more thing to say. “Unbind him,” he tells the people around him. “Let him go free.” We cannot live the fullness of life that Jesus calls us to by ourselves. We need the community. We need the support of other people to help us undo the things that bind us, to learn how to live in new ways, to focus not on the past but to look to the future. Without the support of others, we stand on the threshold of our new life and remain bound. The Church is a community of people who have been called out of their own individual tombs of darkness, and have been called to unbind one another through forgiveness, encouragement, prayer, example, love and service. The Christian community has a duty to be people who believe in the power of baptism, resurrection and new life—to be a people of hope.

We are the Ones Whom God Loves. Christ calls out to us. He reminds us of our true identity, and draws us forth to a new life. The power of Jesus’ resurrection is at work in us. It empowers us to leave behind any darkness, despair, bitterness, sin, addiction or fear. It empowers us to live as a person of hope. The community around us is there to unbind us and support us. And, in turn, we unbind them through our example, prayer and service. God calls us to be a people of hope for our own sake, and for the sake of the world around us.

For Reflection & Prayer

† Where is God calling you to believe in the power of resurrection for yourself? For our Church? For the world?

† St. James exhorts us to “be doers of the Word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). What is one thing you can do this week to put the message of this Scripture into action?

Our Lord tells us, “No greater love has any one than to lay down his life for his friends.” In this the Lord tells us what the perfect love we should have for one another involves. John the Evangelist draws the conclusion in one of his letters: “As Christ laid down his life for us, so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” We should indeed love one another as he has loved us, he who laid down his life for us. This must not be understood as saying we can be the Lord’s equals by bearing witness to him to the extent of shedding our blood. He, by dying, destroyed death in himself; we are freed from death only in his death. He needed no help from us in saving us; without him we can do nothing. No martyr, by shedding his blood, brings forgiveness of sins, as Christ brought us forgiveness. In this he gave us not an example to imitate, but a reason for rejoicing. Let us then love one another as Christ also loved us and gave himself up for us.

From a sermon by St. Augustine