

5th Sunday Lent A
Homily by Fr. Russ Brown

Apart from our Lord's own Passion and death, I don't know if there is a more powerful, dramatic, spirit-filled passage in scripture, than the events which surround the raising of Lazarus from his tomb.

It deserves mention that Lazarus, and his sisters Martha and Mary, were close personal friends of Jesus. There is a famous meal that takes place in their house that gets a little frosty between the sisters. They welcome Jesus as part of the family.

Important to know also is that Jesus cultivated close personal friends on earth. We find evidence of them throughout the scriptures. That need for friends to share our lives with, is present even in the Son of God, and all the more so for we who are merely human.

In fact, you could explore this story, simply for what it says about friendship, and the emotional response that moves Jesus so deeply. But it is about much more than that. It is about how we experience life and death, and what meaning we draw from it.

Jesus says here that the sickness that claims Lazarus is not to end in death; rather it is for the Glory of God, and through it, the Son as well. What is God's glory? We have heard that phrase all of our lives.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth, the angels proclaim at Christ's birth. Glory is more than a kind of radiance. I would have to say that God's true Glory, is the emergence of life itself. Today's reading points to that conclusion.

Just look at the world around us as we move into spring. Outside my kitchen window there are magnificent stalks emerging from seemingly dead bulbs, buried and forgotten in the ground. Our once bare hills are carpeted with flowers.

For every funeral I celebrate, I baptize a child in the same spot. The constant emerging of new life from the appearance of death gives glory to God.

In the very next chapter of John's gospel, Jesus states, "the hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. This is the truth I tell you---unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains all by itself alone; but, if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Death is a hard topic to speak about. Jesus disciples don't like it at all when he begins to speak about what he will endure. Right after speaking of the grain of wheat, Jesus says plainly "he who loves his life is losing it; and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal."

But you can't really speak about life, and its glory and wonder and promise, without acknowledging death; in the same way you can't inhale without exhaling. You cannot speak about light, without understanding what darkness is.

The wonder of light is that it defeats darkness, and the glory of life is that it defies death. Neither darkness nor death is to be found in God's kingdom. They exist here in this middle kingdom we call the world, wrapped together with light and life.

St. Paul, in today's reading from Romans, has an interesting way of making this same distinction when he speaks of life in the flesh, and life in the spirit. Ultimately, the flesh must pass away, but our true life exists even now, and endures in the Spirit.

For St. Paul, life in the flesh is a necessary part of our being, and doesn't imply sin and corruption entirely. Rather, it carries the sense of the overall human condition, with all its limitations and potential. It reflects the paradox of life as we find it in this world.

The world of Spirit, on the other hand, might best be considered the world of possibilities. It is that part of our being, most attuned to God. Our work is to become aware of that divine dimension within us; just as St. Paul's work is to remind us of it.

Part of the mystery of our life, is our capacity first to imagine, and then attain the possible in our lives, call it vocation or destiny, our highest good. Life in the spirit urges us forward, and our life in the flesh, tends to hold us back, keep us bound by fear or inertia.

I think the perfect image of this is Lazarus himself, bound head to toe in burial cloth, dead to all appearances. Jesus is the herald of the possible. "I am the resurrection and the life, he tells Martha. Whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life."

Do you believe this he asks her, and asks each of us. Do you believe that even the impossible, is possible. Do you truly believe that with God, all things are possible?

Here in this world of both flesh and spirit, we learn to say both yes, and no. Here we must choose between the twos, between light and darkness, good and evil, the possible and impossible. We come to know and appreciate life through our encounters with death.

By the water of our baptism, which unites us to Christ, we are said to pass through death to life. We become new creations, apostles of the possible. If we remain bound, physically, emotionally, or spiritually, may the Lord who raised Lazarus from death, bring us to life in the Spirit through the mysteries of Easter.

If we have bound anyone, in any way, may we listen to our Lord's own command. Untie them and let them go free. May we all live as children of life, and light, and witness to the goodness that is possible when we are open to the love we find in Christ.