

5th Sunday in Lent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ezekiel 37:12-14
<i>Response</i>	With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:8-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will never die.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 11:1-45

On the Fifth Sunday of Lent, the Church gives us another passage from the Gospel of St. John. This is the famous story of the raising of Lazarus. It's another one of these miracles of Jesus that is only found in the Gospel of John and which the Church sees fit to put before us during the Lenten season -- even though it's Year A and we are in the Gospel of Matthew, she is giving us another story from the Gospel of John. So today what we are going to do is we're going to walk through the story of the raising of Lazarus and try to put it in its first century context. But once again, just like with the man born blind, it is a long story. So I want to read through it first and hopefully give you a sense of just the dramatic character of John's telling of this major miracle of Jesus, and then ask what would it have meant in the first century A.D., and then what does it mean today for us in the Church during the Season of Lent as we prepare for the great Easter vigil and for the celebration of Christ's resurrection. So let's begin with John 11:1-45, here is the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Lent:

Now a certain man was ill, Laz'arus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Laz'arus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness is not unto death; it is

for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it."¹

Pause there. Notice something real quick, that this story contains the characters of Mary and Martha, the two sisters, who also appear only in the Gospel of Luke with the famous account of Martha busy with much serving while Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his teaching. So John here appears to assume that you know who those characters are so keep that in mind as we move through the story, because you are going to see the characteristics of Mary, who is very contemplative, and Martha, who is very active, showing up in this Gospel as well. Let's keep going, verse 5:

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Laz'arus. So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Pause. Notice this. John explicitly says that the reason Jesus stays longer once he hears that Lazarus is sick is because he loves him. That's a puzzle. We are going to have to come back to that, but it's really important to note it as we are moving through the story. So it continues:

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go into Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

Pause there. Notice that last week we looked at the man born blind, where Jesus says "I am the light of the world" and that those who don't recognize him as such

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

are spiritually blind. So here when the disciples say let's go into Judea again, he is using that term Jews to refer to the Judeans, meaning the Southerners, the people of Jerusalem and the South who rejected Jesus as a Galilean coming down from the north. So that's what he's getting at here. Those who don't see the light of the world, who are spiritually blind. He is not talking about religious Jews because Mary is a Jew, Martha is a Jew, Lazarus is a Jew; he is talking about the Southerners versus the Galileans. Just keep that in mind as we are walking through. In other words Judea, Jerusalem and the city in the South, is becoming dangerous. And so the disciples say "why do you want to go back there? They are going to kill you." Now keep going in verse 11:

Thus he spoke, and then he said to them, "Our friend Laz'arus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."

So they think that Lazarus is just taking a long nap or maybe he's in a coma or something like it. He's asleep.

Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Laz'arus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Pause there. Notice Thomas recognizes that Judea is getting dangerous for Jesus and his disciples and yet he's willing to go and die for Christ. So we always talk about Thomas as the doubting Thomas, but we forget he is also courageous Thomas. He is the one who is willing to go into dangerous territory with Jesus to die with him. Verse 17:

Now when Jesus came, he found that Laz'arus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews [think many of the Judeans] had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. When

Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary sat in the house.

Pause there. Notice that Martha is active just like she was in the Gospel of Luke. She rushes out to meet Jesus while Mary sits quietly in the house. Their personalities really come through. Verse 21:

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world."

Pause there. Notice what just happened. Lazarus is dead. He's been dead four days, and when Jesus comes, Martha says "if you had been here this wouldn't have happened," which the reader now knows isn't true, because Jesus knew about Lazarus' sickness and that he was going to die but he stayed longer and allowed it to happen. So when Jesus says to Martha "your brother will rise again," Martha thinks he's talking about Lazarus being raised from the dead on the last day of the final judgment -- because the Jews had a tradition, going back to the book of Daniel and other places (Isaiah) that at the end of time, at the end of this world, all of the dead would be raised in their bodies for the final judgment on the last day. So Martha misunderstands Jesus. She thinks he is talking about the resurrection at the end of time and Jesus is actually talking about Lazarus' resurrection that is about to take place. And so when he asks Martha "do you believe in me?", Martha makes a confession of faith that is almost as great as Peter's in the Gospel of Matthew. "You are the Christ, the son of God, he who was to come into the world." So again we often think about Martha just because of her anxiety over

serving, but we want to remember that she was also a woman of great faith, who made one of the most important confessions of faith in all of the Gospels, recognizing Jesus as the Messiah and as the son of God. Now what about Mary her sister? Verse 28:

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying quietly, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him, fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."

Then we have the shortest verse in John's Gospel, a very famous verse:

Jesus wept.

Just two words, "Jesus wept."

So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Notice here that the Judeans make the same mistake that Mary and Martha make. That if Jesus loved Lazarus he wouldn't have let him suffer and die. If he loved Lazarus he would've prevented his sickness, he would've prevented his death. That's really important to grasp, they don't fully understand what Jesus's purposes are in this miracle, they don't understand how Jesus can both love Lazarus and yet allow him to remain in his suffering, to remain in his sickness, and even to die.

Jesus is about to show us why he did it in the next verses. So let's keep going, verse 38:

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb; it was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days."

Pause there for just one second. Notice that John has twice emphasized that Lazarus has been dead four days. Why does he do that? Well in a first century Jewish context, many Jews believe that the soul departed definitively from the body after the third day. So that in the Mishnah, which is a collection of Jewish laws, it said that you couldn't identify a body for legal purposes after the third day. And the reason this was the case was because Jews did not embalm bodies, they actually allowed the body to decompose. They would use spices and things to cover the odor, but they didn't embalm a body like the Egyptians, because when a Jew would be buried, they would put him in a cave and allow the body to decompose and then later come back about a year or two and gather up the bones and put the bones into an ossuary, a bone box; and that's how they would keep the remains of their loved ones. So without any embalming whatsoever, after three days there is definitely going to be an odor and the body would have begun to decompose. So Martha is aware of that and she's concerned about the stench coming from the tomb. How does Jesus respond? Look at verse 40:

Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Laz'arus, come out." The dead man came out, his hands and feet

bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him;

Okay, there is a lot going on here. What can we say about this passage, what did it mean in its first century context, and then why does the Church choose it for the last Sunday before passion Sunday, before Palm Sunday, the kind of climax of the Lenten journey before we enter into Holy Week. A couple of things. Number one. Clearly the passage is focused on suffering and death, and Jesus explains at the very beginning that the illness of Lazarus is not unto death -- not meaning that he wouldn't die physical death right -- but rather that it's not going to end permanently in death, but rather it is going to be for the glory of God. So Jesus is going to use the death of his friend Lazarus as an opportunity to show the glory of God, to show the power of God, to show the power of Jesus over not just suffering, but death and even decay itself, the decomposition of the body. So this is one of Jesus' most powerful signs. It is one of his greatest miracles in all the Gospels, and that is one of the reasons I think John records it for us, because it isn't recorded in the Synoptics and John wants to make sure we know about this momentous raising of Lazarus from the tomb.

Number two, why does Jesus wait two days longer to go to Judea? Well this is an interesting thing. John says very specifically that Jesus did this because he loved Lazarus and Mary and Martha. That's a very mysterious thing. Can you imagine a situation where let's say I'm giving a lecture in class at the seminary and my wife calls and says your daughter is very sick, very very sick. I think she might be dying. And I would respond, "okay well I'm going to stay here at work a couple days longer. Because I love her." That's totally counterintuitive! It doesn't make any sense whatsoever. But Jesus isn't an ordinary man. He doesn't have an ordinary love for Lazarus. He allows Lazarus his friend to suffer and die because he's going to bring him back from the grave. And in the living tradition, St. John

Chrysostom (different Fathers of the Church would explain it different ways) but St. John Chrysostom said this about this, "Many are offended when they see any of those who were pleasing to God suffering anything terrible. Those who are offended by this, however, do not know that those who are especially dear to God have it as their lot to endure such things, as we see in the case of Lazarus, who is also one of the friends of Christ but was also sick."² So what Chrysostom was pointing out here is that there's a mysterious reality about the Christian life that those who are called to a special holiness, those who in a sense God loves in a special way, he often frequently allows to suffer in a special way, he allows to suffer in a great way. And if you want any proof of this just pick the life of any great saint. John Paul II, Saint John Paul II, had Parkinson's. St. Bernadette Soubirous had a tumor. St. Therese of Liseux: tuberculosis. To say nothing of all the martyrs who God allows not just to suffer, but to be put to death for the sake of their faith. So, on a natural level, you would see that you would say, "God must not love these people because they're sick and they're suffering and they're dying." And what John is revealing to us here is no, no, no! Those whom God loves in a special way he draws into the mystery of the cross, he draws into the mystery of his own suffering and his own death. I'll never forget the first time I started reading the lives of the saints. I was like, "I'd like to be a saint one day. Let me read the lives of the saints." And then I start reading it. Every one of them: sickness, illness, suffering, family members die, they lose their mother, they lose their father, they lose their wife. And I began thinking I'm not so sure I want to be a saint anymore! I mean this looks awful because they're always undergoing physical calamities and physical suffering, but the reality is that in the midst of that, God is drawing them closer to the love that He showed on the cross. And that's what Chrysostom is saying here about Lazarus.

Now, does that mean that Jesus doesn't feel the pain of Lazarus's suffering? Or that it makes his suffering somehow good? No! When Jesus encounters the suffering of Lazarus, when he encounters the fact that Lazarus has died and been buried,

² Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John 62:1

what does he do? In his humanity, He weeps. Just like Martha, he feels the fullness of the pain of the loss of Lazarus. There's a beautiful quote from St. Augustine that I have where Augustine said, "Why did Jesus weep?" Everyone sees that verse. Jesus wept. Why did he weep? Augustine says, "Why did Christ weep except to teach us to weep."³ In other words, Christ does not diminish the reality and the horror of suffering by redeeming it. He fully participates in that and he shows us that to weep and to mourn over the suffering and death of the world is natural and it's a good thing. He himself does it. He recognizes that suffering and death is an evil. And he feels the pain of that loss in his own human heart. However, he allows it to take place because there is a greater glory to be revealed. St. Peter Chrysologos said this in his homily on the raising of Lazarus he said, the reason Jesus allowed Lazarus to suffer and die is because, "for Christ, it was more important to conquer death than to cure disease. He showed his love for his friend not by healing him but by calling him back from the grave. Instead of a remedy for his illness, he offered him the glory of rising from the dead."⁴ And this really gets to the essence of why the Church picks the story of the raising of Lazarus for the Fifth Sunday in Lent.

Because this is the last Sunday before Palm Sunday and what we're preparing to celebrate during holy week is the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So the last miracle she's gonna put before us on the Fifth Sunday of lent before we get to holy week is Jesus's demonstration of his power over sin and death in the raising of Lazarus to show that he has power over the grave, that he can raise Lazarus from the dead even after the tomb has been closed for four days and Lazarus's body has begun to rot, has begun to decompose. That is no barrier to Jesus's power to give him life. That's the meaning of this miracle. In other words, it's a sign that points forward to the resurrection of Christ that we will be celebrating on Easter Sunday.

³ Tractates on the Gospel of John 49:19

⁴ Peter Chrysologus, Sermon 63:1-2

And if you have any doubts about that you can just look at the first reading for this week, Ezekiel 37. The Old Testament reading in this case continues to journey through salvation history, but now is pointing forward to the end of history with the resurrection of the dead. Ezekiel 37 is the famous vision of the valley of the dry bones. We got that old song you know? I don't remember all the bones but the leg bone's connected to the hip bone. That old song about them bones them bones. That actually is a hymn based on Ezekiel, the vision of the Valley of the dry bones where God takes the bones of the dead and reassembles their bodies, and then puts skin and flesh on the bones and breathes into them and gives them life. In other words, it's a prophecy of the resurrection of the dead. In the reading for this week, I'll just read it because it's really powerful. It's just two verses from Ezekiel 37:12-14, we read:

Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done it, says the LORD."

Powerful, powerful. So notice, in the Old Testament already God is promising that one day He's going to open the graves of the people and He's going to put his spirit within them. In other words, he's going to give them life, but not just natural life. He's going to give them the supernatural life of the Holy Spirit.

And so, that's also the reason the Church then chooses the second reading which is from Romans 8, which is also about the resurrection. Although notice this, and this is really crucial. In Romans 8, we're not just talking about the resurrection of Christ. Paul uses the resurrection of Christ to drive home to the Romans the truth that if Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, then guess what your destiny is, as a

Christian, not just the immortality of your soul in heaven forever, in a disembodied state, but the resurrection of your body to live forever with the Lord. So, in Romans 8:8-11 we read:

And those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.

So I can't stress this enough. I think many Christians out there are perfectly content to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, like his body and soul reunited and then he lives forever within his body, but they sometimes don't translate that into the fact that that is their destiny as well. That the good news of the resurrection is not just that Jesus was raised, like that he's back from the dead, but that he will raise all of humanity on the last day, that we will be raised, and that the Spirit that dwells in us now through baptism will one day give life to our mortal bodies and conquer the grave itself. And that's something really to pray for and pray about as you head toward Easter, just to take some time to meditate on your own bodily resurrection at the end of time. I think some, especially a lot of Catholics, we tend to think because the Saints are disembodied souls in heaven now, that it will always be that way. That's not the teaching of the Church. Even the saints in heaven, with the exception of Mary, are waiting for the resurrection of their bodies, the reunion of their souls and their bodies on the last day, and for God to make all things new and a new heaven and a new earth in our resurrected bodies.

So that's what Lazarus is all about. That's what the raising of Lazarus is about. It points in a twofold way to Jesus's power over the grave, that he's gonna show us on Easter Sunday when he rises from the dead, and it also points forward to our own

resurrection on the last day at the end of time when he will give life to us. And so I'll end with this beautiful quotation from Andrew of Crete. He was an Eastern Church Father, and he gave a homily on the raising of Lazarus which is basically written in a kind of song form where Jesus is speaking to Lazarus. And it's a meditation on Jesus's words, "Come out!" Where Jesus commands him to come out of the tomb. This is what Andrew of Crete said:

Lazarus, Come out!... As a friend, I am calling you; as Lord I am commanding you...Come out! ...Let the stench of your body prove the resurrection. Let the burial linen be undone so that they can recognize the one who was put in the tomb. Come out!... Come out of the tomb. Teach them how all creation will be enlivened in a moment when the trumpet's voice proclaims the resurrection of the dead.⁵

So what Andrew is saying here is that, meditating on the words of Jesus, that in a sense, we should put ourselves into Lazarus's place because one day we too will die. And our bodies will decompose, and most of us are going to be in the grave a lot longer than four days, and yet that decomposition of our bodies, that experience of death, that experience of the tomb, is no barrier to life. It's no barrier to the friendship of Christ because on the last day, Christ will call us forth from our graves as our friend if we've lived in friendship with him. And he will command us as our Lord, the one who made the heavens and the earth, to come out of the tomb and to experience the resurrection of the dead, the new creation, and the life of the world to come.

⁵ Andrew of Crete, Homily 8 on Lazarus