

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish

Newark, DE

The Fifth Sunday in Lent – April 6, 2014/Year A

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

+++++

*May my words reveal the greater glory of God.*

*AMEN*

+++++

Over twenty-one years of ordained ministry, I have been blessed to celebrate countless moments with others in this journey of life. Celebrations of worship on a typical Sunday, marriages, baptisms, confirmations, reconciliation and restoration of a person to the community of faith, and many, but never enough, resurrections from the death-grip of addiction. Yet there is one part of my call that brings me to pause. And that is each time I stand at the edge of the open grave at the Committal in our Burial Office.

Over these events in my life, and the life of us all, I have learned that it is wise not to stand too close to the edge of the grave in the springtime. As the earth revives and warms from winter's deep frost, it becomes more malleable, soft, and slippery. Not paying attention, one might fall into the grave unaware. A colleague of mine did just that at a Committal service at St. David's. We got her out as it was not her time, yet.

Standing with family and friends, as one around this image of the completion of our earthly journey, I experience two distinct emotions of those around me, and within myself. One of these emotions is **grief** at the loss of this loved one from this life as we know it, and from our daily presence. The other, interestingly, is **hope, always hope**. As we live on, so may the life of the one who has died in us. Our faith informs us this is so as we hear our Lord Jesus proclaim on this day in John's Gospel. The life on our beloved can live on in our hearts that we may live our life a little more richly, a little more lovingly, and little more in ways of blessing to our world as they have blessed us.

By faith, we are one with our Lord Jesus **standing on the edge of hope**.

+++++

Our Gospel lesson this morning is the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Through this story, we see the faith of Martha, the grief of Jesus, the frankness of Martha as she says there will

be and odor. This is a story of hope as Martha hopes that Jesus can do something about Lazarus. It is the story of hope in the midst of despair.

It is the kind of hope one can experience in life all the time when we are aware. It is the kind of hope shown by a family who narrowly escapes their burning house, only able to helplessly watch it be consumed and destroyed. It is the hope of friends and neighbors who bring supplies and food in this desperate time of need. It is the hope incarnated when the mother of the family takes these offerings, sets out a table in the yard, finds wildflowers to place in a can on the table, and all gather around the table in gratefulness to share hope. She did not try to cover up the disaster with flowers, but in the midst of that tragic scene she had placed these as her symbol of hope. **Hope does not cover up what has occurred, but it gives a promise of something better to come.**

That was Martha. She had the hope that something better would happen when Jesus came. She even says, *"And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."* **Martha had hope.** Jesus gives a glimpse of what was going to happen when he says, *"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?"* Jesus turns Martha's hope into action. While Martha is thinking about the resurrection at the end of time, Jesus is talking about the resurrection through him and for all those who believe in him.

Mary next comes to Jesus, stating as sister Martha, *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* The depth of the pain in Martha and Mary, the mourners who follow and care for them in this time of loss, ALL this grief is born in the heart of Jesus. We then read the shortest verse in the Bible – *"Jesus wept."* While translation has changed the power of this moment into what sounds like a single tear trickling down the cheek of Jesus, the underlying Greek conveys that Jesus **shuddered with sadness.** Now we experience Jesus as one with us in that wracking, uncontrollable sobbing and wailing like others.

Jesus asks where they had laid the body. Notice that Martha did not believe completely as she says there will be an odor when the stone is removed as Lazarus had been dead for four days. But Jesus commands the stone to be removed and calls, *"Lazarus, come out!"* And to the surprise of the many who had gathered, Lazarus walked out of the tomb.

This story is a glimpse of what is to come on Easter. This is the prelude to the Easter story, a foreshadowing of what was to come. For the story of Lazarus is **a story of hope, a story of resurrection, a story of who Jesus really is, the son of God.** This is a story that tells us out of discouragement comes hope. Martha and May were discouraged, but even in that discouragement they saw a hope. German theologian Jurgen Moltmann expresses in a single sentence the great span from Good Friday to Easter – **"God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him."**

+++++++

As we now stand on the edge of another Passion Week in our life journey, we **stand on the edge of hope** as our faith reveals in its odd and curious way. For me, to really enter into Passion Week

from the journey of my holy Lent, I need to do so as an **agnostic**, literally meaning entering this time again as one **un-knowing**. My faith redeemed and resurrected each Holy Week must integrate **my analytical head with my open heart**. I am invited to let go of all those preconceived ideas and convictions about life as I understand it to be open to Love again. I need to pray through my own certainty of the world as I know it, and open my head and heart to the divine surprises that Love will bring beyond myself.

We see the figure of Lazarus, wrapped in bands of white cloth, appearing at the edge of the cave. The raising of Lazarus will be the trigger for Jesus own death in John's Gospel. This is the wonder of the great exchange we celebrate most fully in the Paschal Mystery. Jesus Christ died to free us from the power of Death, and rose from the dead so that we might live forever.

The unbinding of Lazarus combined with the binding of Jesus, will be echoed in the Passion Narrative at the moment of Jesus arrest when our Lord identifies himself as the one they are looking for and commands his captors to "*let these others go.*" By his sacrifice, the **binding** of Jesus in betrayal, derision, suffering, and death, we stand on the edge of hope once again to embrace the words Jesus says to those gathered as Lazarus emerges, to embrace the words we most desperately need to hear, "*Unbind him, and let him go.*"

How do you need to be **unbound** in life by the present power of Love in Jesus Christ? What is stirred in you, through what has been your journey this holy Lent, to embrace the power and promise of our faith that unfolds in the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ?

How are you called this day, with our Lord Jesus, **to stand with him on the edge of hope.**

**Do you believe this?**

*AMEN*