

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish  
Newark, DE  
The Fifth Sunday in Lent – April 3, 2017/Year A  
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45  
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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

AMEN

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As the hymn proclaims, **“Oh what joy and delight!”** ANOTHER deep, layered, multi-personality filled LONG story from John's Gospel to bring our Lenten journey to the doorstep of Holy Week. Well, at least it is somewhat appropriate to the story that is to come, right?

From this week's LONG narrative of John, **three characters** quickly emerge before my prayer eyes. First, there is **Martha and Mary**, long beloved BFF's to Jesus along with their brother Lazarus. They know him as Jesus the friend AND Jesus the One of God. This leads Martha, and later Mary, to ask the same question – *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died ... I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”* Then Jesus says, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me ... will never die. Do you believe this?”* This is one of **those Jesus questions** that sit on our chest like an elephant! It is what we claim at the end of Holy Week with intention to be the proclamation we live **out there in the world?** It is ultimately what makes us Christian, you know?

Second, there is **Lazarus**. We hear less from him for he is in the tomb now for four days. I wonder if Lazarus, stirring in his four day tomb and beginning to feel the grave clothes weighing on his skin, had to take a moment to consider. When he heard that cry from beyond the threshold of his tomb, and when he awoke to that voice, beloved but already growing strange to ears that had begun to settle into the silence. When that command came and challenged the dead calm of the grave, **did Lazarus give a thought to staying put?** It cannot have been easy, feeling the pulse of life tickle at the flesh already loosening from his limbs. I wonder if he was tempted to simply roll over and turn his face toward the wall so that he could continue his slide into whatever came next after this life.

The journey of Lent really boils down to this one question, and how we respond to it – *“I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?”*

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Our Gospel lesson this morning is the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. 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 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. 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.**

This describes Martha. **She hoped** 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 ... whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”* Jesus turns Martha’s hope into a call to action. While Martha is thinking about the resurrection at the end of time, Jesus is talking about the resurrection for all those who believe in him.

Mary next comes to Jesus, stating as did her 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, 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 all the 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!”*

In the book **Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality**, Fr. Roland Rolheiser experiences the raising of Lazarus in these ways ...

**“We must distinguish between two kinds of death, two kinds of life ... there is *terminal death*, a death that ends life and all possibilities beyond, while *paschal death* is a real, but while one kind of life as we know it end, another opens us to a richer, deeper form of life. There are also two kinds of life ... a *resuscitated life* is when one is restored to the former life and health. *Resurrected life* ... is not only the restoration of one’s old life but the opening to a **RADICALLY NEW LIFE**. Lazarus gets his old human life back ... Jesus receives the radical new life, one to which he would not die again. The paschal mystery is the pathway of transformation in which we can receive **BOTH** new life and new spirit.” [pp. 146-147]**

This story is a glimpse of what is to come on Easter. The story of Lazarus is **a story of hope, a story of resurrection, a story of Jesus who really is the son of God.** This is a story that tells us out of discouragement comes 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 [God]."**

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There is that lovely story in **Zorba the Greek.** Zorba encounters an old, old man busily at work planting new sapling olive trees in his garden. Zorba, puzzled by this seemingly silly activity, asks **"Why are you planting these trees when you know you will die before you see any olives?"** Never looking up from his planting, the old man answers with a smile, **"Because, my young man, I live each day as though I am never going to die."** As Zorba walks away, a similar smile appears on his lips as he thinks, **"How strange – I live as though I were going to die tomorrow!"**

Nobody goes into the tomb to pull Lazarus out. No one crosses into his realm to haul him to this side of living. Lazarus has to choose whether he will release himself from the hold of the grave,, from its hold on him, and from his hold on it. Only when Lazarus takes a deep and deciding breath, rises, returns back across the boundary between the living and the dead. Only then does Jesus say to the crowd, *"Unbind him, and let him go."* Not until Lazarus makes his choice does the unwinding of the shroud begin, and the grave clothes fall away.

The journey of Lent really boils down to this one question, and how we respond to it – *"I am the resurrection and the life. **Do you believe this?"***

**So, tell me ... what will you REALLY, REALLY want to do with your one wild and precious life.**

*AMEN*