

The Raising of Lazarus
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April 2, 2017
5th Sunday of Lent
Ez 37:12-14; Rom 8:8-11; Jn 11:1-45

Lazarus, come forth! Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus calls each one of us by name today to come forth from our graves; to become alive again and light again in the Lord. And he does so through our mother, the Church. The story given for our reflection begins with a family pleading on behalf of one of their own in desperate need. The sisters, Martha and Mary, seek healing and health for their brother Lazarus who is ill. Though the one in need seems different from the others already mentioned by John in his gospel: the married couple in need of more wine at their wedding were at best acquaintances of Jesus; the Samaritan woman seems more like a stranger than anything else, crossing paths with our Lord; the royal official was unlikely known personally to Jesus before he healed his son whom he surely had not known; the cripple at the pool of Siloam, the thousands satisfied by the multiplication of loaves, the woman caught in adultery, the man born blind: all were healed and attended to by our Lord...and yet none was like Lazarus. He was a close friend; someone he knew intimately and spent time with, he was someone he loved,... and Jesus simply said to his distraught sisters that the illness will not end in death, rather it is for the glory of God! And then Lazarus dies. And Jesus proclaims "I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe."

When we hear of someone's death, that of a stranger's, a friend's or a family member's, it's awfully hard to see its meaning. It's easier simply to brood over the end that has taken place: the person's presence is gone, no more smiles, no more quarky encounters, no more conversations, just silence, an emptiness. As Martha spoke with Jesus upon hearing of her brother's death, she confesses her grief but applies as well the salve of her belief to the deep wound. *Even now I know*

that whatever you ask of God, God will give you. Her faith, however, is smaller than what Jesus is asking for. She believes in the resurrection, yes; but only on the last day. Jesus is a miracle-worker and his ability, she thinks, stops there. Her brother is dead and she must wait to see him again in the life hereafter.

Our Lord, nevertheless, adamantly and forcefully tries to help her see what she and everyone must know, that He is the very resurrection and life that they all desire. It is not about the resuscitation of a loved one from physical death to life, but the divinization of the person through the very word and life of God himself. It is a call to an abundance of life through faith. Jesus is the answer to our limitations of perspective, our attempts to grasp the mysteries and conundrums of life's journey, often made without much insight or consolation. Jesus is the light and life that we need to pulse within us in order that we may glorify God as intended by the Father.

Martha then secretly tells her sister Mary about Jesus, and she too confesses her faith in Jesus and, although it seems greater than Martha's, it is still too weak to perceive our Lord's true mission and identity, as the very incarnation of Life and Love itself, full of utter compassion, mercy and forgiveness. For Jesus is greatly disturbed not simply at the death of his friend, but even more so at the inability of those around him to see who he really is! The sisters and the Jews speak of how he 'loved Lazarus', but John the evangelist informs us that Christ's love for Lazarus was of a whole other order, it was the love of *agape* not *philia*, it was the love of God not just human friendship, as is his love for us all.

Jesus nevertheless does not back away from his mission but proceeds to command that the stone be taken away. Martha again manifests her imperfect understanding with her all-too-human concern about the body of her brother after four days. At this Jesus repeats that her belief will

reveal to her the glory of God. Then Christ prays not for Lazarus to be raised but gives thanks that he has always been heard by His Father. *Lazarus, come forth!*, he says. *Untie him and let him go.*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus wants to remove the stone from our hearts and bring to life what is dead within us. He desires to unburden us of the bonds that bind us and the fetid areas of our life that continually make us slog through our spiritual lives with little fervor and love. Many sins plague us, some at one point in our lives, and still others as we mature, grow older and change. Whatever it be right now, uncover it, roll that heavy stone away and look at it, be offended by its distastefulness, the unhappiness it keeps bringing you, the deep pain and hurt that you have buried within you, and the displeasure it causes our Lord. Be rid of it now and do not let it take root in you and wreak havoc on your soul and those of your loved ones. Christ is longing for your complete trust and faith in Him to heal you, to transform you and to enliven you with his own love.

Opening the tomb of Lazarus opened up another harrowing point in the life of our Lord. By performing such a miracle, he incited his enemies to take irreversible steps toward accusing him, condemning him and crucifying him. Jesus united his will with the Father's and faced the fatal consequences out of love for us. Equally so we must not fear to face the death, darkness and sacrifice within ourselves in order to reach the life that lies within it and beyond it. Dying to self leads to discovery of self through faith and hope in God. We do not do this alone either. The greatest intercessor we have is the Church herself, whose daily sacrifice is united to the perfect one of Christ's Paschal mystery. We also pray for one another and we look to the example of the saints for their earnestness in bringing about the kingdom on earth and in themselves. Let Mary, the Mother of God and the Mother of the Church, guide each of us to listen to our Lord calling us by name to come forth toward Life and Resurrection.