

Fifth Sunday of Lent
April 10, 2011

On the fifth Sunday of Lent each year, I try to raise a glass to playwright Eugene O'Neill. *Lazarus Laughed* deals with the life of Lazarus after the Son of God has summoned him from the grave. It is the story of a lover of Christ who has tasted death and sees it for what it is – the story of a man whose one invitation to all is his constant refrain:

Laugh with me!
Death is dead!
Fear is no more!
There is only life!
There is only laughter!

And O'Neill tells us: Lazarus "begins to laugh, softly at first," then full-throated – "a laugh so full of a complete acceptance of life, a profound assertion of joy in living, so devoid of all fear, that it is infectious with love," so infectious that, despite themselves, his listeners are caught by it and carried away.

At the root of O'Neill's play lies John's Gospel just proclaimed. What might the risen Lazarus say to you and me right now – especially as Lent draws on to Easter and we move more and more intensively into the paschal mystery, the mystery of dying/rising? I suggest he would repeat the refrain O'Neill put on his lips:

Laugh with me!
Death is dead!
Fear is no more!
There is only life!
There is only laughter!

You and I can echo that refrain with deeper understanding than O'Neill's Lazarus. You and I know why "death is dead:" Christ has conquered death by his own dying/rising. You and I know why "fear is no more:" for "neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." You and I know why "there is only life:" Right now our spirits are aquiver with the life of the risen Christ. You and I know why "there is only laughter:" because Christian laughter is sheer joy in living, in coming alive.

The trouble is, few live fully the logic of that divine life. Perhaps too often we resemble a leading character in O'Neill's *The Great God Brown*: "Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colors of earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid of love, I who love love?"

Like the gospels of the last two Sundays, this reading is directed particularly to those preparing for baptism and those parents bringing their children for baptism at Easter. As St. Paul tells us in the second reading, the newly baptized person is "a new person" with a new life. For us already baptized, we can do well to reflect on how much we have continued to see that life growing in us.

As the pastor of this new parish, I have one prayer for each of you. I want you to know how special you are. I want you to experience a joy, a thrill, a satisfaction in your "new life" at Christ Our Hope Parish. I want us to inject a sense of Christian hope into the sadness, the darkness, the tragedy that shadow human existence. I want the Holy Spirit within these walls to be a living force that can shape our lives along Christian lines, along the lines of a dying/rising Christ. Only in the power of the Spirit can we respond with a resounding "Yes!" to the question the Lord asked Ezekiel: "Son of man, can these dry bones live?"

Only in the consciousness of Christ who is Our Hope will we learn and live the paschal mystery, its pith and marrow. While physical death is the experience of all, faith in Jesus brings promise of a life that never ends. "Everyone who is alive in me and believes in me shall never die." One who is totally united with Christ begins to enjoy never-ending life right now. "Death is dead, fear is no more." Only then will our laughter be Lazarus-like, full-throated, "a laugh so full of a complete acceptance of life, a profound assertion of joy in living, so devoid of all fear, that it will be infectious with love," so infectious that, despite ourselves, those who hear it will be caught by it, swept away to the Lord who can spark such life, such laughter. "I live, no, it is not I, but Christ who lives in me."

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