

## Fifth Sunday of Lent – Sunday of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Scrutiny

March 17, 2013

We have just heard a story of a death in the family. It was a sudden death, and devastating to the surviving family members. The grief of the two sisters of Lazarus cannot be avoided – nor their anger. “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” The impact that a death in the family brings is worth thinking about.

Jesus cries twice in the Scripture that we know of – once over Jerusalem and here at Lazarus’s death. He cries in the face of a death in a family that he loved. He cries because he has lost his friend. But perhaps there is another reason he cries, having less to do with the dead man than with those around him. Jesus is moved to tears because he sees the power of death over the living, and how it effects their relationship with him. In this story the power of death blocks everyone from coming to full faith in Jesus.

From the beginning Jesus says that death is not the end for Lazarus. Then he waits two more days before suddenly deciding to return to Judea. The disciples oppose his decision: “The Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?” Jesus replies, “Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him.” And when they press him on this, he finally says, “Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe.” The purpose of this event is to lead to faith, but the disciples do not understand. We see this in Thomas’ response: “Let us also go to die with him.” From the very beginning, then, the focus of those who surround Jesus is on death – not on coming to believe, but on death embracing all of them.

When Jesus gets there, Martha comes out. Traditionally, this conversation is seen as a great expression of faith. But I argue that it is no such thing. No one comes to full belief, and especially not Martha. Martha’s conversation with Jesus starts with a rebuke, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She is looking to Jesus as a miracle worker, one who cures sickness. When Jesus says,

“Your brother will rise,” she replies, “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.” Then Jesus, the Word of God, says: “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” And Martha responds, “Yes, Lord. I have believed that you are the Christ, the son of God, the one who is coming into the world.” But Martha does not express belief in Jesus as the resurrection and the life. It is not full faith she expresses, but only a partial one. This is confirmed when they get to the tomb and she responds to Jesus’ command to roll away the stone by saying, “Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days.” And Jesus rebukes her: “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” Martha has only been able to go so far on the way to faith.

Mary goes further. She kneels at his feet and repeats part of what Martha says: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died,” but she does not ask that Jesus be a miracle worker. It looks like Mary has it right – she trusts in Jesus. But then she is pulled back in the grief of the moment. She goes back to weeping. And the Jews with her are weeping. And they express their stance: “Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?” For them, Jesus is no more than a miracle worker.

Here we see the power of death over the living. There is not one person who is not taken up in grief. There is no one who trusts in Jesus as the resurrection and the life. Not the disciples, not Martha, not Mary, not the Jews... no one. The power of death overwhelms them all. Death has swallowed them up.

Death continues to be the greatest threat to faith – to *our* trusting God. The power of death crushes life, not only the life of those who die, but of those who surround them. In the face of death, Jesus continues to proclaim: “I am the resurrection and life.” And then to ask us who gather around the table, “Do *you* believe this?”

Lent is a season that allows us to linger at the various graves that life has set before us: the death that ends a life, that severs a relationship, that strangles a spirit. Lent calls us to look at death and then to look into the face of the One who says, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

At the end of Lent we are invited to answer his question, “Do you believe this?” to profess our faith in the risen, crucified Lord, who broke death’s chains and walked from the grave into the dawn of a new day. And in the meantime, we continue to do our Lenten preparation: to fast, to pray, and to reach out in generosity and care toward those in need. Today, we receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation – to renew our life in Christ, to continue our transformation into a community of resurrection and new life.

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