

## Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 25, 2012

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. Death has the power to rend the lives of the living and to leave a gaping wound that might never be healed. The power of death can easily block us from coming to full faith in Jesus.

The focus of those who surround Jesus is on death – not on coming to belief, but on death embracing all of them. We see this in Thomas’ response: “Let us also go to die with him.” No one in the story comes to full belief. This conclusion might come as a surprise, since Martha is often held up as *the* example of faith in Jesus. But Martha does not express belief in Jesus as the resurrection and the life. 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.” Martha has only been able to go so far on the way to faith.

Mary goes further. She kneels at the feet of Jesus and repeats part of what Martha says: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 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. 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 conquered their hearts. Death has swallowed them up.

Then Jesus prays. And finally comes the cry: “Lazarus, come out.” The tears of Jesus at the failure of all present to put their trust in him gives way to a word of liberation: “Untie him and let him go free.”

Death continues to be the greatest threat to faith – to *our* trusting God. The power of death is omnipresent in our own day: the endless series of deaths in Syria and Afghanistan and Nigeria – an escalating spiral of vicious bloodletting; the power of death in our own country, as we use military power and defense spending to bring peace to the world. The power of death has come into our Church in the wake of the tragic occurrences of pedophilia and the death of trust between hierarchy and laity. 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 the 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. To this end, on this day, 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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