5th Sunday of Lent

The Raising of Lazarus

We may not have lost a brother named Lazarus, but I’m pretty sure most of the adults here today have experienced the death of at least one person we loved deeply. It can be extremely painful. Many of us, have been through profound grief more than once; a bundle of losses, a prayer book with many prayer cards. Even many of the children here have experienced a loss that really hurt. So we can understand something of what Martha and Mary were feeling when their brother died.

John tells us they had confusing mixed up feelings. “Jesus is our good friend. He is here now. That is comforting. But why didn’t he come right away??” We’ve had times like that too. Finding some consolation from God, but then at other moments, torn with “where was God when I prayed so hard for help?”

That is all in this Gospel today. John wants us to know how important friendship and friends were to Jesus. He had friends, and loved them deeply. Friends, all who choose to follow him are still very important. John also wants us to know Jesus wept for his friends, and he weeps for us and with us when we are sad and hurting.

But if there is one person in the story John most wanted people to connect with, and wants us to identify with, I’m not sure it is Martha or Mary. It’s not called the story of Martha & Mary’s grief, and then shock and joy. It’s the raising of Lazarus.

Jesus actually tells us the point. This is not out Lazarus’ illness and death, Martha & Mary’s grief, or even Lazarus’ second lease on life. It’s about the glory of God, and Jesus being glorified. After all, by the time John wrote this, Lazarus had died the second time. Quite likely his sisters had gone home to God as well.

The day Lazarus was brought back to life was a great day. But the day he was called into glory after he died the 2nd time, that was an incredible day! A fantastic day! The best day! The story holds a lot more than just the temporary reprieve when Jesus woke Lazarus up the first time. This Gospel is leading us into the heart of Easter.

What about this all being for the glory of God? Let me quote a famous Christian and Church Father from the 2nd century. St. Irenaeus wrote:

*The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God. If the revelation of God through creation already brings life to all living beings on the earth, how much more will the manifestation of the Father by the Word bring life to those who see God.*

That day when Lazarus came out of the tomb, he, and Martha and Mary, and many of those nearby who began to believe in Jesus experienced first hand that Jesus IS the resurrection and the life. They had a glimpse of God who is life itself. Seeing God, through the work of His Son, brought them to a new relationship with God. In that new relationship, they all became fully alive, a new creation. That is God’s glory, and it is meant for us as well.
Death, in the tomb, bound head to foot in burial wrappings: That is not just the Lazarus story. Without Christ’s resurrection, without Christ opening to us the path to eternity, it would be our story too. Death, in the tomb, bound head to foot. Now, and at the end. But it’s NOT our story.

Through this Gospel Christ is not just calling Lazarus to come out. He has called and is calling every one of us to leave behind the darkness of doubt, of despair, of grief, of a lack of hope, of sin. Leave behinds everything that keeps us bound and in darkness.

Come out into the light. Experience the warmth and brightness of the sun (Son). Risk losing the burial clothes and the familiarity of the tomb. Hear the call, come forth. Let others help unbind us. Then truly free, help unbind others.

When we see God revealed in Jesus, when we really see, when Jesus is no longer a person of history, but our Savior, Redeemer and friend, we come fully alive.

The Glory of God shines in Jesus. When we let him live in us, as Paul tells us in the second reading, our spirit comes to life. When we open our lives to God’s spirit dwelling with in us, we do just what we are sent to do at the end of Mass: Glorify the Lord with our life.

At the beginning of the story, Martha and Mary believed the idea that Jesus was The resurrection and the life. After their brother experienced Jesus as the resurrection and the life, those were no longer just words and an idea. They witnessed, they experienced Jesus and saw first hand Jesus is resurrection and the life.

From Bethany Jesus went to Jerusalem. He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. He offered his life for us on the cross, in the perfect sacrifice of love. Having conquered sin and death, from the grave, he rose again. If you go to Bethany and visit the grave of Lazarus, there is a whisper of hope. Go then to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Resurrection, and the hope echoes like the sound of a trumpet. This story is really setting the stage for the hope we celebrate Easter morn.

Lord, help us hear your call. Help us experience deep within that you are the resurrection and the life. Help us hear your call and come forth. Give us friends to help unbind us. Set us free from the tomb as you freed Lazarus. Let your glory be revealed in us as disciples, fully alive! We too can live for your glory, glorifying you with our life!