

March 29, 2020

5th Sunday of Lent

John 11:1-45 (The text in italics is omitted in the short form of the Gospel.)

Now a man was ill, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil and dried his feet with her hair; it was her brother Lazarus who was ill. So the sisters sent word to him, saying, "Master, the one you love is ill." When Jesus heard this he said, "This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was. Then after this he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." *The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in a day? If one walks during the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks at night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." He said this, and then told them, "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him." So the disciples said to him, "Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved." But Jesus was talking about his death, while they thought that he meant ordinary sleep. So then Jesus said to them clearly, "Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe. Let us go to him." So Thomas, called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go to die with him."*

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. *Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, only about two miles away. And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him; but Mary sat at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. (But) even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise." Martha said to him, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus told her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."*

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary secretly, saying, "The teacher is here and is asking for you." As soon as she heard this, she rose quickly and went to him. For Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still where Martha had met him. So when the Jews who were with her in the house comforting her saw Mary get up quickly and go out, they followed her, presuming that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Sir, come and see." And Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him." But some of them said, "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?"

So Jesus, perturbed again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay across it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him, "Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus raised his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me." And when he had said this, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go." Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him.

Background:

This text is one of the most important texts for the Christian community and it is one of the longest. Only the passion accounts are longer.

The gospels contain three accounts of Jesus restoring life to the dead. Both Mark and Luke describe the healing of Jairus' daughter. (Mark 5:22-24, 35-43 and Luke 8:41-42, 49-56) Jairus comes to Jesus while his daughter is still sick, and asks Jesus to come and heal her. While they are speaking, they receive news of the death of the young girl. Jesus goes with Jairus to his daughter's side and restores her to life. The second account of Jesus raising someone to life is only recorded in Luke's gospel. (7:12-17). A widow is leaving the town of Nain to bury her only son who had died sometime earlier that day. Jesus encounters the woman as he is entering the city and is moved by the situation. He stops the burial procession and restores the man to life. Luke does not say how long the man had been dead, but he has certainly been dead longer than Jairus' daughter. In today's text, Lazarus has been dead four days and the presumption is that the body would have already started to decompose. John wants his community to know the raising of Lazarus is not like the raisings of the others recorded in Mark and Luke. Here Jesus is restoring the body, not just reinserting the life force into a body that recently stopped functioning.

John points to the significance of this event by including the reaction of the religious authorities to what has taken place. In the other gospels, the leaders plot ways to kill Jesus after he goes into the temple and overturns the tables of those selling coins and animals used for making an offering. But in John's gospel, the Pharisees and high priests come to that decision after Lazarus is raised. The seven verses following the gospel text are:

“But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, ‘What are we going to do? This man is performing many signs. If we leave him alone, all will believe in him and the Romans will come and take away both our land and our nation.’ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing, nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish.’ He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to kill him.” (John 11:46-53)

Lastly, Martha and Mary, two known friends and early believers, ask Jesus directly the questions that are on the minds of the community as they deal with the deaths of those who had lived with Jesus before and after the resurrection.

- Why did Lazarus or any of those who believe in Jesus have to die?
- If Jesus has the power to cast out demons and cure a man who was born blind, could he not have done something for Lazarus and for all who believe?
- Why did Jesus have to ascend to heaven and abandon the Christian community?

Both Martha and Mary believed that if Jesus had been there, he would have had the power to do something to prevent Lazarus' death. (11:21 & 11:32) Both of them, like John's community, are struggling to understand their faith in Jesus, their lived experience of death, and the questions that arose out of that lived experience.

Reflection Questions:

1. Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was gravely ill. What does this say to you about their relationship with Jesus and their hopes/expectations?
2. As Jesus finally made his way to their home, Mary stayed at home but Martha went out to meet him. What do you think John is telling us about each of these two women? Do you relate to one more than the other?
3. Both Martha and Mary say the same thing to Jesus when they encounter him. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." As you hear their questions, what thoughts and feelings stir within you?

4. Have you ever felt like Martha and Mary; that if God wanted to, God could have prevented the death of someone you loved?
5. Have you started to think about your own death? Do you have any questions or fears about death, dying, and life after death?
6. John tells us in verses 33 to 35 of this gospel that when Jesus encountered the sorrow of Martha and Mary and the reality of the tomb where Lazarus had been laid, he wept. What is John telling us about Jesus, and about God?
7. Can you take some time to talk to God openly and honestly about your feelings and questions that arise within you from this text, the death of people you know personally, or situations across the world as we deal with the coronavirus?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for March 29, 2020, the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Thus says the Lord God: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, O my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land; thus you shall know that I am the Lord. I have promised, and I will do it, says the Lord.

With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice! Be attentive to my supplication.

If you, O Lord, mark iniquities, who can stand? But with you is forgiveness, that you may be revered.

I trust in the Lord. More than sentinels wait for the dawn, let Israel wait for the Lord.

For with the Lord is kindness plenteous redemption; he will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.

Brothers and sisters: Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the spirit, if the Spirit of God dwells in you. Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit.

Mary and her sister Martha sent word from Bethany to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was ill.

When Jesus heard this he said, "This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God."

After two days Jesus said, "Let us go back to Judea." The disciples said, "the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?" Jesus answered, "If one walks during the day, he does not stumble, he sees the light of this world. But if one walks at night, he stumbles; the light is not in him."

He told them, "Lazarus has died. I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe.

Let us go to him." So Thomas said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go to die with him."

When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Many Jews had come from Jerusalem

to Martha and Mary to comfort them. Martha heard that Jesus was coming, and she went to meet him. Martha said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise." Martha said, "I know he will rise in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die." She said, "You are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." Mary went to him, and the Jews who were with her. She fell at his feet and said, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Sir, come and see." And Jesus wept. Some of them said, "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?" Jesus came to the tomb and said, "Take away the stone." Martha said, "By now there will be a stench." Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" They took away the stone. Jesus said, "Father, I thank you for hearing me. I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me." He cried out, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, tied with burial bands, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said, "Untie him." Now many of the Jews who had seen what he had done began to believe in him.

Excerpts from Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalm 130:1-8; Romans 8:8-11; and John 11:1-45