

**Fifth Sunday in Lent (Lent 5A)i – April 6, 2014**  
**Ezekiel 37: 1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**“I am the resurrection and the life.”**

Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary lived a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem in the town of Bethany. They were close friends of Jesus, and he stopped by often. When he made his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it was from Bethany that Jesus set out, and he even returned for a few days just prior to his final arrest.

The final of seven miraculous signs through which John’s gospel reveals the person and purpose of Jesus takes place there in Bethany, and that is what we hear today. The raising of Lazarus, in fact, becomes the pivotal event leading to the whole Jerusalem showdown of Jesus’ arrest, trial, execution, and resurrection.<sup>ii</sup> John’s resurrection story of Lazarus has all the makings of a dress rehearsal for Jesus’ own story (and, indeed, leads to it). This scene has a cave and a stone covering, and discarded linens lying on the ground. This story invites us to approach the events of Holy Week with a sense of both déjà vu and irony. For as Jesus is proclaimed as Lord and giver of life, the very act of raising his friend Lazarus to life proves to enflame others and becomes the catalyst that sets in motion the events that lead to his own death on a cross.<sup>iii</sup>

The wisdom of many religious traditions speaks of our lives as lived for the purpose of preparing us for our death. The loss of my father at an early age – never seeing him again after the age of eight - became for me an early dress rehearsal for facing other losses, small and large (in my personal and parish life), which in turn, provide rehearsals for the facing of my own death—though still, at this point in my life, I can say with all the ambivalence of Woody Allen that I’m not afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens!

Our gospel story today was placed in this particular Sunday’s readings as far back as the third century church. This story was presented two weeks before Easter because for the early Church the resurrection was such an amazing, unbelievable thing that they had to work up to it, as it were. And it’s placed before us today for the same reason. After all, resurrection is entirely unnatural. To paraphrase Frederick Buechner, humankind does not go on living beyond the grave, because that is simply how we are made.<sup>iv</sup> As our body and soul are part and parcel of each other as the sticks and flame that make up a fire, when we die we die one hundred per cent. We are dust and to dust we shall return. And so we go to the grave as dead as doornails, *but* are given life back again by God in resurrection, just as we were given it in the first place, because that is the way God is made, as it were. So, rather than the notion of an indomitable or invincible human spirit that marches on after death in a continuous and natural progression from life to immortal life, our Scripture instead speaks of resurrection based on God’s eternal and steadfast Love and Power once the human body/spirit is no longer—an entirely unnatural event—an act of God.

When Lazarus died, Jesus didn't arrive in Bethany until several days afterwards—four days to be precise. By including this detail of delay, the gospel writer underscores the unnatural, miraculous nature of Jesus raising Lazarus. According to the rabbinical tradition, a person's life-breath was thought to hover near the body for three days, after which death was pronounced with certainty. The fact that Jesus raised Lazarus after four days made his claim “I am the resurrection and the life” all the more irrefutable and his act of raising Lazarus, who was dead as a doornail, all the more astoundingly real. This couldn't be faked. This was really an act of God, through Jesus who was so alive with the Spirit of the Lord, the giver of life, that he couldn't help but bring to life his close friend. In doing so he revealed just how present and near God's power and love were, and how such life giving possibilities couldn't be contained or controlled by any religious or imperial authority.

When Jesus first arrives, he finds Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary still in shock and grief, so much so that first they reproach him for not having come in time to save their brother. Then, they tell him they know he could save him still. Lazarus' passing, it seems, was one in which something had gone terribly wrong.<sup>v</sup> A “tragic” death, a death that came too soon to somebody too young, visited on unsuspecting family and friends who didn't think such a thing could or would happen to them – as Jesus' own death would be. And so Martha and Mary each cry out to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” That Lazarus' death was a wrenching, premature and inconsolable death can be deduced by that word “if” that circulated among the bereaved family and friends. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32). The “ifs” of Martha and Mary cannot be suppressed. And who of us has not shared in something like that same numbed anger, the haunting “if” that these sisters make known to Jesus? “If she had just had her seat belt on...” “If he'd only taken a later flight that day...” “If she had just gone to the doctor sooner...” And who of us, like Jesus, has not turned to tears as a deep sighing prayer for, or catharsis from, an unspeakable pain. So, although at the beginning of this story Jesus seems to be rather nonchalant about Lazarus' illness and seemingly sudden or quick death, as he finally arrives and sees the grief and pain of their loss, he himself—the Lord of Life—breaks down and cries.

We, too, are shaken oftentimes. Let's step back for a minute and ask what we know about the problem of pain and suffering. As Buechner puts it, as people of faith, we know three things: first, God is all-powerful; second, God is all good; and third, terrible things happen.<sup>vi</sup> Now we can reconcile any two of these propositions with each other, but we cannot reconcile all three. The problem of pain, tragedy and evil—why bad things happen to good people—is perhaps the greatest single problem for religious faith. There have been numerous theological and philosophical attempts to solve it, but when it comes down to experiencing evil acts or tragic events, none of these answers or theories are worth much. For example, when a child is beaten and murdered, most of us are not apt to take much comfort from even the explanation, that, since God wants humanity to love God and one another, and since love requires freedom to be truly love, human beings must be free to love or not to love, and thus free even to beat and murder another human being, if they take a notion to.

Other popular points of view attempt to “solve” the problem of why bad things happen to good people, by asserting that evil and pain do not exist except as an illusion of our mortal minds. Or, some solve it in terms of a belief in an inexorable law of cause and effect whereby the victim is merely reaping the consequences of evil deeds committed in this or a previous life. Or, we hear the vague, and at times truly insensitive and erroneous lines such as “God is just testing you,” or “It’s God’s will”—even if the person saying this is just trying to make some sense of it and doesn’t even believe what they are saying.

In contrast to all these perspectives, as followers of Christ, ultimately we can offer no theoretical solution at all. We can only point to the Word who became flesh, and who lived among us, and to his cross, and say that, practically speaking, there is no pain or tragedy or evil so terrible or obscene but that God can turn it to good, if not right away in our time, then at some time, in God’s time; and that most importantly, God will at least *be with us in the tragedy*.<sup>vii</sup>

The one who raised Lazarus from the dead, the one who himself is raised from the dead, the one who raises us from the dead, is the same one without whom we would not have life to begin with. In our first reading Ezekiel spoke of the revival of the exiled people returning to Judah from captivity, which he likened to recreating life from a mass of dry bones. So also, in our gospel we have a vision of a God who cares as much about us now during our brief lives as God cares after we die. For Jesus’ statement “I am the Resurrection and the life” (11:25), is stated in the present tense. In fact, as Jesus relates to each person in this story in different ways—as teacher, friend, fellow mourner, as the power of resurrection itself—in each way he enables transformation to occur in the here and now.<sup>viii</sup> In and through relationship with Jesus and one another, people find real transformation *right then and there* in the midst of tragic moments. Jesus who is the resurrection and the life doesn’t just make that reality apparent in the afterlife, but rather in the midst of living and life itself.

So, this story is about loss and preparation for further and greater losses—a dress rehearsal for Jesus’ death and resurrection and our own deaths (and eventual resurrections). And yes, this story is about cherishing all the more the people who are around after a loss. But more than these, this story is a rehearsal for our lives *lived now*, for our living fully with and through loss; for the greatest tragedy is not death itself, but what dies in us while we are still alive. Because this whole story and Jesus’ actions, and the various transformations and his statement “I am the Resurrection and the life” all occur in the present tense, this story is more about how life can be lived here and now, in the resolute hope and faith and love of God’s presence and purpose. Of course, when we don’t live this out very well, it can become a point of reflection. We act; we reflect, we act some more. Life, in fact, is not merely a dress rehearsal for the future as much as it is simply showing up now (like Jesus), being present; being and acting and reflecting in the actual play of life itself, in the present moment, which is the *only* moment we are truly alive. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> See also Lent 3C and All Saints Day (or the Sunday after All Saints) (Year B) (#1 and #2); see also Barbara Brown Taylor, God in Pain (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 66-70.

<sup>ii</sup> The other three gospels put Jesus' cleansing of the temple as the pivotal point of their accounts leading to Christ's passion and death.

<sup>iii</sup> In order for Lazarus to live or rather be brought back to life, Jesus must return to Bethany which was becoming more and more dangerous. Earlier there, in fact, Jesus was almost stoned to death by an angry mob. This and the events that follow, have Jesus exchanging his life for the life of his friend Lazarus, thus doing no less that Jesus taught his disciples to do.

<sup>iv</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 42-43.

<sup>v</sup> The death of Lazarus from what this story conveys, was not the kind we would call a good death such as the death that comes mercifully after a long life or after a prolonged debilitating illness, the kind we could call a healing death or a merciful release for one who has become just too tired and too sick or worn out to go any further. Just the opposite of that kind of death.

<sup>vi</sup> Buechner, *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>vii</sup> When Jesus wept over the dead body of his friend Lazarus, many things were probably at work in him, and likely there were many levels to his grief. Again, Frederick Buechner captures some of these levels which begins with the basic fact of Jesus weeping because his friend was dead and he had loved him. Beneath that, Buechner suggests, Jesus wept because as Martha then Mary each reminded him, if he had only been present, Lazarus needn't have died, and he was not present at least not in the way and to the extent that he was needed. Buechner then adds,

“Beneath even that, it is as if his grief goes so deep that it is for the whole world that Jesus is weeping and for the tragedy of the human condition, which is to live in a world where again and again God is not present, at least not in the way and to the degree that humanity needs God. Jesus sheds his tears at the visible absence of God in the world, where the good and bad alike go down to defeat and death...He is disturbed in spirit and deeply moved to tears at the blindness of human beings which prevents even Jesus himself a few days later, from seeing God to the extent that at the moment of all moments when he needs God most - on the cross - he cries out his 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me,' which is a cry so deep and dark that of the four Gospel writers, only two of them had the stomach to record it as the last words he spoke before he died. Jesus wept, we all weep, because even when humanity is good, even when that human is Jesus, God, it seems, makes himself [herself] scarce for reasons that no theological or philosophical explanations can really fathom” (Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 106).

There is, in this story, one other way Jesus experienced and expressed strong emotions--perhaps at the deepest level—namely out of his anger at the presumed power of death with which he, as the “resurrection and the life” was about to do battle, first at Lazarus' tomb and soon thereafter on his own cross and three days in a tomb. This anger calls forth a courageous facing-into the abyss of death. That is the essence of Jesus as the bearer of hope; for hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then resolutely acting to change the evidence. Hope is the God-part that is still there in us even when our worst fears have been realized. With the death of Lazarus – and soon his own death - a number of peoples' including Jesus' own worst fears were being realized. Yet given that it is God who hopes in us, that hope is sure and powerful. And so here Jesus faces right into the hopelessness of his friend's tomb and with a loud voice of anger and courage he calls Lazarus forth from the tomb. As St. Augustine later said, “Hope has two lovely daughters, anger and courage; anger so that what cannot be, may not be; and courage, so that what must be, will be” Quoted in Robert McAfee Brown, Spirituality and Liberation: Overcoming the Great Fallacy, (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1988), p. 136). And this reminds of us an earlier statement by Jesus in John's gospel, “the hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of

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the Son of God, and those who hear will live...all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out..." (5:25, 28-29a). In the depths of being greatly disturbed to tears, Jesus, rather than being immobilized in his distress, instead resolutely bears the suffering of Lazarus' death on himself while turning it to good. He goes to where his friend's body lay and brings him back to life again.

<sup>viii</sup> For example, in the early part of this story, the disciples are fearful at first to re-enter the dangerous territory of Bethany, yet in their relationship with Jesus their fear is transformed into remarkable courage, summed up by the disciple Thomas who says, "Let us also go that we may die with him." And the sisters who first encounter Jesus with a mixture of grief, confusion and anger, through their relationship with Jesus find themselves coming to a faith and hope that he is making all things right.