

5th Sunday in Lent (Year A) The Raising of Lazarus, John 11:1-45

Another miracle found only in the Gospel of John.

Mary and Martha, the two sisters, also appear only in the Gospel of Luke, with Martha, the busy one and Mary, the contemplative, sitting at Jesus' feet. John assumes you know who they are.

John explicitly says that the reason Jesus stays longer once he hears that Lazarus is sick is because he loves him. That is strange.

Last week, in the man born blind, Jesus says "I am the light of the world" and those who don't recognize him as such are spiritually blind.

Remember, the "Jews" refer to the Judeans, the people of Jerusalem who rejected Jesus as a Galilean. They don't see Jesus as the light of the world and are spiritually blind. So, Jerusalem is becoming dangerous.

Jesus says Lazarus is asleep, meaning dead, but the disciples misunderstand.

"Doubting" Thomas recognizes that Judea is getting dangerous for Jesus, yet he's willing to go and die for Christ, he is also courageous Thomas, willing to go into dangerous territory with Jesus to die with him.

Martha is active, just like she is in the Gospel of Luke. She rushes to meet Jesus while Mary sits quietly in the house.

Lazarus has been dead four days, Martha says "if you had been here this wouldn't have happened," which we know isn't true. Jesus knew Lazarus would die and he stayed longer and allowed it to happen.

When Jesus says to Martha, "your brother will rise again," Martha thinks he's talking about the resurrection of the dead on the last day, as told in the book of Daniel and Isaiah. Martha misunderstands Jesus.

When Jesus asks Martha "do you believe in me?" Martha's confession shows she is a woman of great faith. The shortest verse in John's Gospel, "Jesus wept." The name of a bowling team at my previous parish.

The Judeans make the same mistake that Mary and Martha make, namely if Jesus loved Lazarus he would've prevented his sickness and death. They don't fully understand what Jesus's purposes are in this miracle, that Jesus can both love Lazarus and yet allow him to suffer and die.

John again emphasizes that Lazarus has been dead four days. Why? Many Jews believe that the soul departed definitively from the body after the third day. Jews did not embalm bodies. They used spices to cover the odor. They would put a body in a cave and allow the body to decompose and later come back and gather up the bones and put them in an ossuary. So Martha is concerned about the stench coming from the tomb. How does Jesus respond? "He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.'" Many of the Jews had seen what he did and believed in him. Why this Gospel for OCIA?

The passage is focused on suffering and death, and Jesus is going to use the death of his friend Lazarus to show the power of Jesus over not just suffering, but death and decay itself. This is one of Jesus' greatest miracles in the Gospels.

Why does Jesus wait two days longer to go to Judea? John specifically says that Jesus did this because he loved Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. That is totally counterintuitive. But Jesus doesn't have an ordinary love for Lazarus. He allows Lazarus his friend to suffer and die because he's going to bring him back from the grave.

St. John Chrysostom explained it this way: "Many are offended when they see any of those who were pleasing to God suffering anything terrible. Those who are offended by this, however, do not know that those who are especially dear to God have it as their lot to endure such things, as we see in the case of Lazarus, who is also one of the friends of Christ but was also sick."

So there is a mysterious reality about the Christian life that those who are called to a special holiness and that God loves in a special way he allows to suffer. Many great saints have suffered and have even been put to death for the faith. On a natural level one would say, "God must not love these people." John is revealing that this is not true. God draws those he loves into the mystery of the cross and into the mystery of his own suffering and his own death.

That doesn't mean Jesus does not feel the pain of Lazarus's suffering. Jesus, in his humanity weeps. He feels the fullness of the pain of the loss of Lazarus. St. Augustine asks, "Why did Jesus weep?" He says, "Why did Christ weep except to teach us to weep." Christ does not diminish the reality and the horror of suffering by redeeming it. He fully participates in that and he shows us that to weep and to mourn over the suffering and death of the world is natural a thing. He recognizes that suffering and death is an evil and he feels the pain in his own human heart.

However, he allows it to take place because there is a greater glory to be revealed. St. Peter Chrysologos said the reason Jesus allowed Lazarus to suffer and die is because, "for Christ, it was more important to conquer death than to cure disease. He showed his love for his friend not by healing him but by calling him back from the grave. Instead of a remedy for his illness, he offered him the glory of rising from the dead." This is why the Church picks the story of the raising of Lazarus for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, the last Sunday before Palm Sunday, because we're preparing for the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus's demonstrates his power over sin and death and that he has power over the grave. It's a sign that points to the resurrection of Christ.

The first reading is from Ezekiel 37:12-14 and the famous vision of the valley of the dry bones:

Say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done it, says the LORD."

In the Old Testament already God is promising that one day he's going to open the graves of the people and he's going to give them the supernatural life of the Holy Spirit.

The second reading from Romans 8 is not just talking about the resurrection of Christ. St. Paul says that if Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, then our destiny as Christians is not just the immortality of our soul but the resurrection of the body to live forever with the Lord. The good news of the resurrection is not just that Jesus was raised, but that he will raise all of humanity on the last day, and that the Spirit that dwells in us now through baptism will one day give life to our mortal bodies and conquer the grave itself.

That's what the raising of Lazarus is about. It points to Jesus's power over the grave when he rises from the dead, and it also points forward to our own resurrection on the last day at the end of time.