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“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:33).

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Ezekiel 37:12-14; Rom 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

Those preparing for baptism at the Vigil have focused on a series of stories from John’s Gospel as their final formation. Week by week, they have been invited to see with eyes of faith, and in this fifth Sunday before Palm Sunday and Holy Week, they, and we, are presented with the greatest sign Jesus performed before his death. Lazarus is precursor to Jesus’ own resurrection. To believe in the raising of Lazarus is to open ourselves in faith in our own resurrection because of Jesus.

The promise of resurrection is easily the threshold moment in our faith development because it defies the fact of our own death. Jesus loved Lazarus, Martha and Mary, yet Lazarus dies, and both of his sisters confront Jesus with the fact of his death. Why did he not come in time to spare them this terrible loss? We wonder what will become of our faith if someone we love goes to the grave, or as our own death approaches. What good is faith in Jesus or in God if, in the end, death triumphs not just over life, but over love as well?

This question has broken through our own illusions of normalcy because of the pandemic. A deadly virus is invading our cities and defying our sophisticated, hi-tech healthcare systems to stop its spread, and the daily drama of heroic professionals is

countered by the rising death counts. When will it reach our state, our city, our neighborhoods, and will we be ready both personally and spiritually for the possible loss of family and friend, even our own lives?

Jesus' grief puts him on our side of the question. He weeps at the tomb of Lazarus, someone he loved. He is not a distant or indifferent god, but human like us, and his prayer comes from the core of his humanity, joined to every grief-stricken family member or friend who has ever lost someone they loved. His human grief reveals the divine heart that entered history in him to proclaim that God is the God of Life, and that those who believe will never die.

He was not absent during Lazarus' illness and death; Jesus is by every bedside, on every battlefield, in every sick ward and at every grave site, with the bereaved in the moment when loss strips us of every defense and forces us to affirm or reject the deepest intuition of all, that whatever happens, love is stronger than death, that life is greater than physical dissolution and that beyond the grave hope holds a steady course toward eternity and wholeness.

John's Gospel, the last and most theological of the four, was composed a generation after the synoptics for Christians who has endured persecution, the destruction of Jerusalem, displacement and diaspora, the loss of all the original witnesses to Jesus, yet they still believed. If anything, their faith had grown stronger because of crisis and the unmistakable power and presence of the risen Christ in their communities, at their liturgies, in the Word and in their love for one another.

We are heirs to this generation, those who have not seen but still believe. Our faith lies dormant until we need it, then in crisis and in loss, we are called to affirm what the Spirit, our Advocate, has been proclaiming in our hearts since the day we were baptized. The Spirit breathes into our souls that Jesus is alive and he is the Resurrection and the Life, and because he loves us, we will never die.

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