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There is comfort, strength in the story of Lazarus' death

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As we try to listen deeply now to our Scripture lessons today, I think it's important that we understand how in John's Gospel, he uses what he calls seven signs, or miracles -- big miracles or signs that make it clear who Jesus really is -- and the passage that we heard today is the last of those signs and the most extraordinary.

If you want to try to understand what these signs are proclaiming, then it's important to go back to a passage in Matthew's Gospel where John the Baptist, imprisoned because he had spoken out against King Herod, was waiting his death [and] sent messengers to Jesus to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come? Or should we be looking for another?" So then Jesus, drawing from the 61st chapter of the book of Isaiah, says, "Go tell John what you have seen and heard: how the blind have been given new sight, the brokenhearted are healed, and the dead are brought back to life."

These are some of the signs that Jesus had been working. Remember a couple of Sundays ago, the story about the woman at the well, a woman who was deeply broken in spirit. Remember, she had had five husbands, broken relationships that must have left her a very wounded person, and Jesus brought her healing. He had made her a disciple. She went and told other Samaritans about him, and they came, and they, too, became believers as she had.

And just a Sunday or so ago, we heard that story about the man born blind. He went to the pool, washed his eyes, and he could see. It was an extraordinary sign of how God gives the blind new sight. Then today, we have this last of the signs that John uses in his Gospel, the most extraordinary: this story about Lazarus, the friend of Jesus, the brother of Martha and Mary, his very deep friend also, and how Jesus works this sign and draws an extraordinary message from it.

When we start looking at this Gospel lesson, we discover, I'm sure, all of us remember that this is a

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Matthew 23:1-12

Ezekiel 37:12-14

Psalms 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8

Romans 8:8-11

John 11:1-45

Full text of the readings

Gospel that we find very helpful at the time of death, when someone very close to us is dying and we're filled with grief and mourning. And when we hear the dialogue between Martha and Jesus, we discover what gives us hope as disciples of Jesus. It is in that part where Martha said, "Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died, for I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you."

Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again," and Martha right away thinks, "Well, at the end of time, at the Resurrection, when everyone rises," and Jesus says, "No, no, not then. Your brother will rise again now because I am the resurrection and the light, and whoever believes in me, though they die, will live. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Those are words with most profound hope and joy for all of us.

Jesus is the resurrection and the light, and if we believe in him, not only will we never die anytime -- live forever -- but we begin to live the life of Jesus now. "I am the resurrection and the light. Anyone who believes in me, though they die, will live. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die." See, and that's the great message of joy that we anticipate as we look forward now to the feast of Easter, the resurrection of Jesus. He is the resurrection, and when we believe in him, we are guaranteed everlasting life, but not just later -- now. We begin to live the life of Jesus if we believe.

Of course, living the life of Jesus brings us joy, the peace, the goodness, the love Jesus is. We live now the Resurrection, the resurrected life, when we believe in him, and that's the great message of joy that we take with this Gospel. But there's a couple of other things that I think are important for us to realize about the Gospel that perhaps we can continue to reflect on and pray over.

Remember how Jesus, at one time while he was at the Last Supper, he said to his disciples, "Greater love than this no one has, than one willing to lay down their life for others." "Greater love than this no one has," and, as you may have noted as I read the Gospel, twice in that Gospel the disciples are saying to Jesus, "Don't go back into Judea. The leaders are ready to arrest you, put you to death. Don't go!"

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Jesus goes anyway because he [has] determined: "Yes, if they put me to death, I will lay down my life for my friends, those I love," and that's all of us. That's how much Jesus loves us -- ready to give his life, as he was then for his friends, but now for us. "Greater love than this no one has than to lay down your life for another," and that's what Jesus does for us. So perhaps we can continue to reflect and pray on that.

Then finally as we reflect on today's Gospel, we can look at Jesus as one like us in every way, except sin. I think this, too, is something very comforting for all of us when we face death of a friend, even think about our own death. We think -- I presume many of us at least would think -- as we hear this Gospel, "Well, Jesus knew all the time that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Well, yes, the son of God, Jesus, would do that." But Jesus was also fully human. He experienced death as a terrible separation, just as we do.

When someone we love dies, it's a terrible loss, and I always find it comforting to reflect on Jesus in this Gospel. When Mary comes to him, and she falls at his feet and weeps, Jesus is deeply moved emotionally. He's struggling because death is a terrible thing. The one you love is gone for now until we die and we live again. Jesus experienced that loss just as you do, or I do, when someone close to us dies. He wept; it wasn't just play-acting, he wept because he was like us and experienced the terrible loss that death brings.

So if we can be close to Jesus as our brother, one like us in every way, fully human -- like us in every way

except sin -- we can receive comfort and strength as Jesus enables us to understand that through death comes new life. He had to suffer the pain of loss and death so that he, in his humanness, could have that hope that through death comes new life.

If we ... get reunited with Jesus now in our prayer and through the spirit who lives in us, we, too, will know that comfort that comes, understanding that yes, someone dies, but they're not gone from us forever. We are reunited in the spirit of Jesus, and that gives us consolation and joy.

So these are thoughts that we can take with us as we continue to reflect on this marvelous Gospel lesson of today: Jesus is the resurrection and the light. If we believe in Jesus, we live that risen life right now, and when we suffer loss -- a death -- we can take comfort because Jesus is our friend and is with us.

[Homily given at St. Ambrose Church in Grosse Pointe Park, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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