Readings for March 29, 2020 – Fifth Sunday of Lent

‘Untie him and let him go’

This season of Lent has us linger in the doorway between death and life, to imagine, again and again, what it is like to have the Spirit breathing life into us, to rise. (Michelle Francl-Donnay)

Opening Prayer: Lord, you call us to new life every single day. Help us to hear your call, help us to know that you want to bring us out of our tombs. We know we can rise – with you by our side, guiding us to freedom, and to wholeness.

Reading 1  EZ 37:12-14

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, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, 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.

Responsorial Psalm  PS 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8.

R. (7) With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.
Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; LORD, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive to my voice in supplication.
R. With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.
If you, O LORD, mark iniquities, LORD, who can stand?
But with you is forgiveness, that you may be revered.
R. With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.
I trust in the LORD; my soul trusts in his word.
More than sentinels wait for the dawn, let Israel wait for the LORD.
R. With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.
For with the LORD is kindness and with him is plenteous redemption;
And he will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.
R. With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.
Reading II  ROM 8:8-11

Brothers and sisters: Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only 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 of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you.

Gospel  JN 11:1-45

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 Christ, 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.

**Related Reflections**

The chapter from which our First Reading is taken begins with the prophet Ezekiel being dropped down into a valley of dried bones. He breathes, or pronounces, over them and they rejoin into whole bodies. These bones are the whole house of Israel exiled from their homeland in Babylon.

What we hear in our reading is a follow-up prophesy. God will be opening the graves and will call out those who have died. Again, this is directed toward the whole people in exile. God announces that God will do it all, bring them out and send them back to their homeland. The land is a sacred presence and it is the second time God is bringing Israel out of exile or bondage. We are invited more than twice to return to the sacred presence of the very ground of our being. Abandonment is not God’s way, but constantly inviting us out into life is God’s relational pattern.

Our Gospel today has several important aspects. Here are a few reflection possibilities you may ponder:

1. The story is about death and resurrection.
2. The story is how personal Jesus is with his love.
3. The story is about Jesus’ calling us out of our personal tombs.
4. The story concerns Jesus’ being “the light” and “the life.”
5. The story is about the role of “signs” or “works” for the Jews to believe in Jesus.

These elements are spread all through this chapter from John’s Gospel. There was a man of blindness presented so Jesus could be “seen” and seen as the “one who had been sent.” There was hunger and a lack of bread so that Jesus could be taken in or received interiorly. There was thirst so that Jesus could be revealed as “living water.” Here there is death so that Jesus would bring “life” to this world.
These miracle stories all end with some kind of statement of belief. “Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him.” The theme of “come and see” which begins the Gospel creates the dramatic energy within each story. The rising action leads the reader or listener to a similar affirmation of believing because of, and also beyond the signs/miracles.

We, the Church, and those about to enter the Church, are invited to believe in Jesus as the savior, the one who is still sent, the embrace of God for our clayful humanity. Whenever we are gathered together in a faith community, we are surrounded by faith-tested persons who also have gone out and beyond the tombs of their own temptations and sufferings. Jesus called Lazarus, the apostles, the man blinded, the adulterous woman, and the others to believe, not only in him, but in their being sought out and sent out to live their beliefs.

Larry Gillick, S. J., Creighton University – Posted on https://liturgy.slu.edu – St. Louis University

Humans are the only creatures who have knowledge of their own death. Its awareness creeps up on us as we get older. All other animals, plants, and the cycles of nature themselves seem to live out and surrender to the pattern of mortality. This places humans in a state of anxiety and insecurity from our early years. We know on some level that whatever this is that we are living will not last. This changes everything. Our little bit of consciousness makes us choose to be unconscious. It hurts too much to think about it.

On this last Sunday before Palm Sunday, we dare to look at the “last enemy,” death. And the only way we can dare to part the curtain and view death is to be told about our resurrection from it! Yet, I assume we all know that Lazarus did eventually die. Maybe ten years later, maybe even twenty, but it did happen, we assume. What then is the point of this last dramatic “sign” before Jesus’ own journey toward death?

An important clue is given when the disciples try to discourage Jesus from going back to Judea where he is in danger. Jesus says calmly, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? When a person can walk without stumbling? When he sees the world bathed in light.” Jesus refuses to fear darkness and death. Quickly he adds, “Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, I am going to wake him” (John 11:9–11). Those who draw upon the twelve hours, who see the world bathed in light now, have begun to see the pattern. As is often the case with wise people, they let “nature nurture them.” Yes, the other hours of darkness will come, a metaphor for death, but now we know that it will not last. It is only a part, but not the whole of life—just as the day itself is twelve hours and night is the other twelve, two sides of the one mystery of Life. Jesus’ job is simply to “wake” us up to this, as he did Lazarus and the onlookers. Once you are awake to the universal truth, then physical death is no enemy to be feared. “Do you believe this?” he says (11:26).

And then in a brilliant finale, he invites the onlookers to join him in making resurrection happen: “Move the stone away! Unbind him, and let him go free!” It seems that we have a part to play in creating a culture of life and resurrection. We must unbind one another from our fears and doubts about the last enemy, death. We must now “see that the world is bathed in light” and allow others to enjoy the same seeing—through our lived life. The stone to be moved is always our fear of death, the finality of death, any blindness that keeps us from seeing that death is merely a part of the Larger Mystery called Life. It does not have the final word.

Fr. Richard Rohr - blog.franciscanmedia.org
From Pope Francis:

Jesus calls to us as he called to Lazarus in his tomb: “Come forth!” This call is addressed to every human person because we are all marked by death. Christ is not resigned to the sepulchers that we have constructed with our choices of evil and death, with our mistakes, our sins. [Jesus] invites us, almost orders us, to come out of the tombs into which our sins have plunged us. This is where our resurrection begins: when we decide to obey the command of Jesus to come into the light, to life; when the masks fall from our faces ... and we rediscover the courage of our original faces, created in the image and likeness of God.

... The raising of Lazarus shows us that there is no limit to the divine mercy, which is offered to everyone. ... The Lord is always ready to roll away the tombstone of our sins, which separate us from him, the light of the living.

Pope Francis, There is No Limit to the Divine Mercy, June 4, 2014

Related Scripture: But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive, together with Christ. – Ephesians 2: 4-5

Suggested Meditation: Take 5-10 minutes and silently think about the Gospel reading.

Consider this: Jesus stands before the tomb weeping. He places no barriers to his feelings about death. Place yourself in this scene and try to think about what he must have felt as he looked at that tomb, possibly knowing he would ultimately face his own death soon. Possible thoughts:

What do you think his weeping says to us?

Can I be with him there at that tomb with Jesus?

What tombs do I face in my daily life? Who might be there with me?

How do I feel when I hear Jesus say to me, “Come forth!” untied and unbound? What does this call of Jesus move me toward in my life?

Think about the idea of being “unbound.” What does this tell me about what God wants for me? What does this kind of freedom look like?

Discussion Questions

Martha’s sorrow is tinged with blaming Jesus (If you had been here my brother would not have died). Where do I resent the losses in my life and somehow blame God for them?

Even when Jesus tells Martha, “I am the one who raises the dead to life!” she finds it hard to believe. Are there times when I doubt that Jesus can bring life? What can trigger this kind of doubt in me? Who, or what, helps me to hold on to my belief?
Bishop Barron tells us (below) that our readings have shown Jesus healing thirst, blindness, death – all metaphors for spiritual dysfunction. Why do these conditions affect our spirituality? (How do they relate to our relationship to God?)

What can help to counter those times of spiritual dysfunction in our lives?

How does this tie in to the way we mark and honor the season of Lent?

Does this reading, and the other healing accounts, make it easier for me to commend my needs or concerns into God's hands? Why?

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**Let Him Go (From a homily by Bishop Robert Barron)**

The great Lenten readings for Cycle A move in a kind of crescendo from thirst, to blindness, to death—all metaphors for spiritual dysfunction. This Sunday's Gospel deals with death through the story of Lazarus who, after four days in his tomb, represents someone who is totally sunk in sin, totally dead spiritually. The voice of Jesus calls Lazarus, and all of us, back to life no matter what we've done, no matter how dead we are.

Listen to this complete homily podcast by Bishop Robert Barron

[https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/let-him-go/21774/](https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/let-him-go/21774/)

Or, also this homily by Bishop Robert Barron (Lazarus, Come Out)

[https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/lazarus-come-out/](https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/lazarus-come-out/)

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**Closing Prayer**

Good and gracious God, creator of light and darkness, You who move the sun and the stars, move us into the place of light, a light so large it will absorb all the darkness. Help us to be awake and aware, so that we might experience true freedom, and life to the fullest, right here, in your Kingdom on earth. Untie the bonds that confine us, and call us always into the light. Amen.

**Or: Jesus, Our True Love (Hildegard of Bingen)**

Jesus Christ, the love that gives love,
You are higher than the highest star;
You are deeper than the deepest sea;
You cherish us as your own family;
You embrace us as your own spouse;
You rule over us as your own subjects;
You welcome us as your dearest friend.
Let all the world worship you.