

March 9, 2008
Fifth Sunday in Lent

“It’s About Faith”

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 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 from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying 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 also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell

you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him...

Sermon

Last week I spoke of seeing what's right in front of you. I spoke of recognizing how Christ your savior is right in front of you in your life, and how as Christians we are always striving to keep our eyes open and see Him before us every day. It is a good thing to do. But even in our looking toward Christ, we can have a tendency to see what we want to see rather than the aspects of faith which may be more challenging.

It kind of reminds me of Memorial Day. If I were to ask what Memorial Day is, you might tell me that it is the last Monday in May when we as a country remember and pay homage to those men and women who have given their lives in military service. But when we're half way through May and the date is fast approaching, many folks don't really see Memorial Day, but Memorial Day weekend. There is so much hoopla thrown up about the weekend—news programs tout the expected traffic and the importance of good weather, advertisers scream about their special weekend sales events. Lots of people see the party weekend out at the camp, or the time to finally get that home repair job done or simply just an extra day off work. They recognize Memorial Day, but are understandably drawn to the happy, fun and pleasing aspect of the weekend and tend to forget about the important and much less celebratory truth behind this holiday.

When we hear today's Gospel lesson, the raising of Lazarus, we naturally tend to focus on the miracle. Of course we do. It's a dilly of a miracle. Lazarus isn't just a little dead. He's four days dead. He is starting to stink dead. This miracle is very awesome and very public and it seems to be a great climax to Jesus' ministry before Palm Sunday when His passion will begin. And it's very easy for we Christians to breeze through this story and say, "Gee Whiz, there goes Jesus being a nice and wonderful guy and saving the day again. He's so loving and powerful. I'm so glad He's my savior too. He makes everything wonderful." There is some truth to that in the story. I'm sure Mary and Martha are ecstatic to have their brother Laz back. But there is a lot more to this story than just that, and we need to see it for what it is.

However, this "Jesus makes everything wonderful" picture is what a lot of folks want to stick with; that Jesus is the Lord and Savior who is going to make all things right and happy if I stick to believing in Him. And while that is certainly true in the eternal sense, what people like to see is that it is true in the temporal sense on this side of heaven, on this side of the grave. They think that as long as they have faith, this life will be happy and hunky dory. They think that Jesus made Mary and Martha and Lazarus happy; that's what He'll do for me too. That's what Jesus is all about, the happy holiday weekend. I've heard this type of message preached from pulpits on television and I'm certain it is in any number of churches. The message is that believing in Jesus guarantees you happiness here on earth. Let's face it, that's really the truth we want.

But look at this story a bit more closely. Jesus gets word that Lazarus is ill, but is his response to get up and run over and make everything better? No. He responds, "*This illness does*

not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” And although John clearly tells us that Jesus loves Mary, Martha and Lazarus, His main concern isn’t that life be happy for them. His main concern is that God and the Son of God be glorified. And you can’t get around the simple fact that Jesus allows Lazarus to die for this purpose, and that the death causes great grief to those who love him. But in speaking to His disciples Christ reveals the purpose behind this glorification of Himself. *“Lazarus has died and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.”*

This is happening so that people will believe in Jesus the Christ. What’s more, it’s happening to people who already have faith in Christ. Martha comes out to meet Jesus and the conversation leaves no doubt she has faith in Him. *“‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.’”*

Christ asks if she believes in Him, not if she believes He *can* raise her brother, but if she knows that He *is* the resurrection and the life. That is the paramount question. The sisters and a lot of the folks on the scene seem to believe Jesus could have saved Lazarus had He been around earlier. Jesus wants to make clear that He is more than just a prophet or healer. Jesus says, “I AM the resurrection and the life,” not just one who performs them. Jesus wants people to understand that He is Yahweh’s promised salvation for those who believe.

So the reason for Lazarus’ death is that Christ would be glorified and more and more people might believe in Him. So does that mean Lazarus’ death is a good thing? Not at all. It’s a tragedy. All death and suffering is a tragedy. Jesus doesn’t come strolling up with a smile saying “Here I am to save the day.” Jesus’ emotions run from being “deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled” to shedding His own tears at the grave site. He recognizes that death and sin have made a wreck of God’s design and He laments over their carnage.

And then is the miracle. But the prayer Jesus prays is not about Lazarus. Again, it is about the belief of the people. *“Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.”* And John doesn’t spend any time at all on the happiness of Mary and Martha. He focuses on what happens with the crowd. *“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.”* In the next chapter we’re told the chief priest plotted to kill Lazarus because so many Jews believed on account of this miracle and again on Palm Sunday that those at Lazarus resurrection bore witness of it. This miracle was all about bringing people to faith in Christ.

And yes, Jesus’ friends were happy for the moment, but they would grieve again. They would grieve at the death of Christ on the cross, but they would be cheered by the news of His resurrection from the grave. The faith they have in Christ before His death would blossom more fully after they came to realize that His death meant the death of sin and the condemnation that comes with it. They would rejoice in the belief that Christ’s rising to eternal life paid the price for them to do the same.

Yet, they would grieve again. Lazarus would die. Mary would die. Martha would die. Their friends and relatives would grieve for them, and eventually they too would die and others would grieve for them. The hurts and pain and temporal death that go with a world fallen in sin

are still with us. Christ did not and does not make that all go away so every day is a fountain of happiness. But Christ died and rose that the sin of this world does not stick with those who believe. Moreover, just as He raised Lazarus so that those Jews would believe, He sent His Holy Spirit into the world that more and more and more people might believe. He gave us His Word that more and more might come to faith. He gave us His sacraments to instill and build up that faith. Christ is still concerned with belief and still works to make it happen in us.

And though we believers grieve over death and illness and calamity, we do so in the hope of the resurrection. We do so in peace, knowing the Christ has purchased an eternity with Him. Everything now is not happy and hunky dory, but we know that one day it will be so. We face the hardships and struggles and pains knowing that they continue that more and more might be saved.

When we stop and contemplate Memorial Day properly we know it's not some happy-go-lucky weekend. We're anguished over the number of men and women that died in wars serving their country. And though this causes us grief, we can look around at our great country, even with all its flaws, and have a quiet resolution that in the end the sacrifice of these brave men and women served a purpose—to maintain a homeland where our families can grow in safety and peace.

When you contemplate the current suffering and reasons to grieve in your life, I don't think Christ expects you to be happy about it. But I know that He has given us faith, allowed us to believe the truth of His suffering, death and resurrection. He's allowed us to know that He was "*a man of many sorrows, and acquainted with grief*" who came to us that all grief and sorrow would one day end. He has given us belief in Him, that He is the resurrection and the life and that since we believe in Him, though we die, we yet shall live. He has let us know that we can look forward to an eternal homeland of joy, where the brokenness and pain of this world is gone, and sadness and tears are banished.

So are we happy now? Maybe not. Do we have peace? Do we have reason to rejoice? Do we know that these present afflictions will pass, to be replaced by eternal joy at Christ's side? Yes we do. We believe, and in that faith Jesus has already said to us, "Come out!" and our tomb of sin lies empty. Believe it. Keep hold of the gift of faith Christ has given. Nurture and build your faith through Word, worship, fellowship and prayer. Know that Christ is the resurrection and the life, and live this truth out in your lives in the peace He has given us that passes all understanding.