

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (2008) MARCH 9, 2008

FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.

EZEKIEL 37:12-14 ROMANS 8:8-11 JOHN 11:1-45



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It is difficult to imagine how He must have been treated after the event. The people of Jesus' time believed that contact with the dead made people "unclean," and therefore special washings and ablutions were necessary for those who cared for the bodies of the dead. But, here before them at the synagogue, at the market, walking down the street was this Lazarus who everyone claimed had been dead for four days and then brought back to life by Jesus of Nazareth. Curiosity, however, must have gotten the best of people no matter what prohibitions the Law presented, and I'm sure everyone wanted to ask him something. Well, think about it yourself. *What questions would you want to ask someone who came back from the dead? What is it like when your soul leaves your body? Where do you go? Do you see others that you know who have passed into eternal life? Did you see God? What was it like to come back to life?* We know of other people who have had near death experiences, but then there was only a brief time, a few minutes between the time they died and then came back to life. But, we're talking about four days here. Four days—enough time for a body to begin to decompose in the hot climate of the holy land. Such questions are not answered by Scripture. As a matter of fact we meet him one more time at the dinner given in Jesus' honor at Martha's home in Bethany, and then, Lazarus disappears from Scripture.

Our Reading from John's Gospel this morning accepts the fact that death is a part of our lives. None of us can escape physical death, and so, even Lazarus raised by the Lord will eventually pass from this world to the next. For us as human beings, that reality of death affects us in different ways at different times. In our twenties we feel somehow invulnerable and death so far away that it seems unreal until someone we know of our own age is killed in an accident or by some disease, and then like a frightening ogre it becomes a menacing reality which we in time forget. In times of war we either find it a daily reality or somehow by seeing the dead in our newspapers and TVs every evening it becomes an unreal film which we try to deny. As we age into our 80's and 90's when so many of our loved ones and friends have preceded us in death, it is undeniable and sometimes desired. But, aside from physical death, we each face our own little deaths from time to time. It may be in failure or rejection when our hopes are shattered that we feel dull and empty and spiritless. For us as Christians death can also be found in our own sinfulness when we turn our backs on God or use the gifts and talents He as given us unwisely.

There are times when that death by sin becomes a kind of spiritual suicide when we are determined to bring evil upon others no matter what harm it might actually cause us. Carrying a grudge, refusing to forgive can often deaden our souls and cause us suffering more than anyone else. But, no matter how we might experience these moments of death, they keep us from experiencing the lives God gave us in their fullness.

While physical death is inevitable, these other deaths are certainly not what God wants for us, and we are given constant graces to prevent them if we will only accept the Lord's help. As we approach these final weeks of Lent and prepare to experience yet again Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection, we need to be more aware not only of the life that flows to us from Christ's self-giving, but also to the call of Christ to each of us. Just as He called "Come out Lazarus!" as he was bound and imprisoned in his tomb, Jesus calls us. He calls us from the tomb of those events that drain the life out of us, the sinfulness that inflicts pain on both ourselves and others, and holds us bound as Lazarus was held bound by his linen wrappings.

Our celebration of Easter, and especially as we celebrate it in the Liturgy of the Easter Vigil, is a celebration of mystery and glory. In it all we believe about Christ, about who He is and all that He has done for us becomes present in symbol and liturgical ritual. As we move from the blessing of the new fire, and our Church grows from darkness to full life as "Christ our light" is intoned, as we hear the readings that tell the story of our salvation, and the Easter water is blessed we come to realize that the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, continues to live and to move around us and in us, always renewing us as Church by those that He leads to us to share in our faith. In two weeks, Andrew our elect, will approach the font, and when the Holy Water is poured over him, he will die to sin and rise with the Risen Christ. It is the most profound celebration of our Liturgical Year reminding us that we should constantly be dying to sin and rising with Christ through His grace.

As He called Lazarus, Jesus calls us to life with Him that allows us to be freed from the hurts of the past, and healed of those same wounds. As He called Lazarus to life He calls us to face our sinfulness and weakness yet again, and with His help to take the awkward steps to reconciliation.

John's Gospel does not tell us what happened next after Lazarus was freed from his bonds, but we can only believe that as He wept for his dead friend, Jesus now rejoiced, embraced him, and continued to assure him of His deep friendship. If He calls us out of the darkness that deadens us, we too will be embraced and supported in His friendship.