

The Fifth Sunday in Lent – 2023

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:1-11

John 11:1-53

Thomas, Martha, Mary and Lazarus – they are your teachers this morning. Their lives, their faith, their words, it is all on display for you to apprehend and inwardly digest and incorporate into your Christian outlook. Thomas, Martha, Mary and Lazarus – God gives them to you. These four are teachers of the highest order. So common, so relatable; you are to know them like you know your sister, like you know your best friend. Thomas, Martha, Mary and Lazarus – each of them has a gift for you, an invaluable gift that will strengthen your spirit and lead you forward in life. Are you eager for the confidence that prevails over difficulty? Do you believe that God's Word is a divine source of wisdom, a living instrument by which we become wise, by which we grow in character, by which we become thoroughly acquainted with our Lord, by which we receive the salvation it bespeaks? That is *exactly* what it is. Thomas, Martha, Mary and Lazarus – they were there; they interacted with the Lord of glory. In this life, you *will* encounter what they encountered. Thomas, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus – those who internalize these four will be greatly blessed.

Lazarus is sick. Mary and Martha send word. The request is implicit. A healing is necessary. "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:3). Bethany; Lazarus is in Bethany, a stone's throw from Jerusalem. Judea is like the Inland Empire. Bethany and Jerusalem are like towns in the Inland Empire. Judea was a hostile place to the Lord Christ. It would be perilous for Him to venture there. After a brief delay, after a strategic and well-planned delay, Jesus tells His disciples: "Let us go to Judea again" (John 11:7). They're shocked! What?! "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and you are going there again?" (John 11:8). Avoid peril; that is not our Lord's ministry, not our Lord's mission. Lazarus is the Lord's ministry. Lazarus and his tomb is the Lord's mission. Dead; Lazarus is dead and that is precisely where Christ is going.

Let us go to Judea again. Lazarus has died... let us go to him (John 11:14-15). For Jesus, going to Lazarus' tomb means going to His own death. Thomas knows this. Thomas is a disciple, a follower of Christ the King. Where you go, I will go. You are my Shepherd. You lead me in the paths of righteousness. I cannot find life apart from you. Is that what you believe? It is absolute vanity to chase a cross-less Christ, a cross-less Christianity. Christianity is a life lived in the context of death. We share in His sufferings. To be sure, it is a fearsome prospect. But who, ultimately who, is in charge? Who governs heaven and earth? Why are you here, in this place, on this day? You are here because Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on a cross and by His blood you have been forgiven. Death is a defeated enemy. In the cross is found eternal life; no where outside of Jesus' death can anyone find life. Jesus rose on a Sunday. That's why you're here. You are here because it is God who governs your life. Thomas, a disciple like you, said this: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). Thomas knew; no servant is above his master (John 13:16). Bold, faithful, trusting – Thomas is your teacher. The way of the cross is the way of life.

Martha; she is distressed. The Lord knows the storm in her heart. He came to Bethany to address that storm. Jesus was not coming to Bethany to offer consolation to a weeping woman. He came to resurrect a dead man. Pay attention to her words: “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” (John 11:21). Martha’s words show that she thinks Jesus is favored by God but that He doesn’t have the authority Himself, doesn’t possess the power in Himself to raise Lazarus. Only God, answering Jesus’ petition, possesses such power and authority. Jesus tells her: “Your brother will rise again” (John 11:23) Martha takes it as an allusion to a later date. “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (John 11:24). This is where Jesus speaks a word that you need to hear all of your life, a glorious word, a defining and courage-inducing word: “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” (John 11:25-26).

Jesus Christ is not merely an instrument for eternal life – He is precisely that in Himself. He is not merely an instrument of forgiveness, not an instrument to raise you from the dead – He is forgiveness incarnate, He is the resurrection in human flesh, He is the Last Day. In His very being, the Lord Jesus is the answer to Lazarus dead in the tomb, the answer to the storm in Martha’s heart, the answer to man being exiled from paradise. “Do you believe this?” That’s what Jesus asks Martha. That is what you are asked. Do you believe this? Here’s a little hint. If Jesus tells you who He is and then immediately asks if you believe *this*, it would be a really good idea to say back to Him what He has just said to you. Martha: “Yes, Lord, you are the resurrection and the life.” But she didn’t. When Jesus said to remove the stone, Martha protested. She’s concerned about the aroma, the stink. What is she holding onto? “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days” (John 11:39). Anxiety; in her mind, it’s too late; death is the victor. Is that our faith?

Mary; the Teacher is calling you. That is the vocabulary of discipleship. When she heard, she rose up quickly and went to Him (John 11:29). Mary is summoned by the voice of Jesus to come to where He is. “Where I am, there my servant will be also” (John 12:26). John tells us at the very beginning of this episode that it was Mary who anoints Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair (John 11:2; 12:1-8). For His burial; Jesus was anointed by Mary for His burial. Where I am, there my servant will be also. The Lord is here. He has drawn you to this place. To serve you with His death and resurrection, He has drawn you to this holy house where His Word is life, where His body and blood is life, where His cross is life. The Messiah has called you by name (John 10:27). You have been summoned to life by the living voice of Christ the King. Where I am there my servant will be also. That is discipleship. You are an intentional follower of the Lord Christ. He is here. Here His Word is proclaimed in all of its truth and splendor and His sacraments are administered according to His command. He is here as One who serves (Luke 22:27). He has called you. You are His disciple.

Lazarus; come forth! “The glory of God is a living man” (Irenaeus, Against the Heresies – ANF 1:490). Death had to be confronted, overcome. When you were dead in trespasses and sins, God made you alive in Christ; by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:1-5). Death does not roll over meekly. A grim enemy, death is armed with malice, seeking to control all that which God created. Sin is death’s authorizing force, its Magna Carta. Jesus utters no divine fiat. It isn’t raw omnipotence that raises dead Lazarus – it is a statement saturated in blood: Lazarus, come

forth. The glory of God was unleashed as the innocent Savior offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. He bore it; the petty and the gross; the enormity of sin's evil and the infinitesimal speck in your brother's eye. Jesus' immaculate flesh was the divine receptacle for all that which is foul and wretched and miserable. Lazarus, come forth. Christ the King took your sin away. He has taken your death away. He is the resurrection and the life. The glory of God is a believing man. The glory of God is a believing woman. The glory of God is a believing child. The glory of God is present in this place.

Thomas; let us also go, that we may die with him. Martha; seeing her brother risen and coupled with Jesus' words, she had her anxiety put to flight and a deeper trust was born. Mary; she prepares the Lord for His burial by her tender gesture of love. Even more, she is determined to be where He is, sitting at His feet, absorbing His Word. Lazarus; he is the fragrance of the resurrection (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). All of that intersects with us, all of that envelops us. We are the Lord's disciples. Christ is among us. He is the resurrection and the life.