

## **Fifth Sunday of Lent April 02, 2017**

Readings: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

The theme of today's liturgy is resurrection and the life. The three readings of today fit beautifully together as they tell us of death yielding to a new way of life. The first reading from Ezekiel describes the event of God sending his spirit and pouring his life into the dry bones. The passage refers to the Babylonian captivity that left the city of Jerusalem in ruins and the people were taken into exile. God promises them a new life and they will be filled with the spirit of God. Paul in the second reading reminds us as he tells the Romans to convert from the ways of the flesh and become alive in holiness. He informs them that the gift they received at Baptism is a transforming gift. The spirit of Christ will strengthen them to bring the bodies of those baptized to share in the resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel tells us that Jesus is the Resurrection and life. Those who believe in him will never die but will live with him forever. Today we have story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead to bring him back to life symbolizing that Jesus himself is the resurrection and life. This miracle leads us to believe in resurrection and new life which exists in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. With this miracle the church invites us to reflect on the significance of our Baptism which leads us into the life of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit we received at Baptism is a transforming gift. The spirit of Christ will strengthen us to bring those baptized together to share in the resurrection of Jesus.

The First Reading of today from the Book of Ezekiel tells us of God's promise to put His Spirit within the people so they may live. Prior to this promise, the prophet Ezekiel, led by the Spirit, was taken into the plain where his mission was revealed to him. The passage in fact is a prediction of the renewed vitality of the whole people of Israel after their exile from Jerusalem. The people seemed dead: their Temple was destroyed, their land wasted, and their leaders taken into custody. There, Ezekiel was told that through his gift of prophesizing, God's chosen people that had been exiled in Babylon for some time would receive a new spirit that would raise them from their lost hope. Consequently they would be led to a new life in the land of Israel. Now God promises to put a new spirit within his people which is a promise to give new life to them. While the Words of God appeared to imply a day of resurrection, in those days, such a belief was only a concept worthy of reflections and there is no reference to the individual

resurrection. The prophet tells the people that God's life giving breath will restore his people as a group and will give them his own life in resettling them upon their own land. For the Jewish community this action of God of recreating, restoring and rising up is giving them a new life and new spirit.

In the second reading of today Paul continues the theme of Resurrection which is common to other two readings. Here Paul contrasts between two widely contrasting kinds of life, namely, the life of the flesh and the life of the Spirit. Flesh for Paul did not mean the body and Paul does not despise the body. Flesh for him meant something similar to what Ezekiel said about the dry bones and the graves. The life of flesh is dominated by self which has no future. It is self-destructive and is the way to death. People who are living according to the spirit live a life of grace. They have God as their center and are spiritually alive. They have a future and have a path of true life and they believe in God the giver of true life. Therefore Paul says that those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. Because the Spirit of Christ dwells in us, we are in the Spirit. Those in who the Spirit of Christ does not dwell, they do not belong to Him. The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same Spirit Who dwells in us. Having raised Christ from the dead, through His indwelling, surely He will also give life to our mortal bodies. As the Father raised Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, so shall He raise our bodies through His Spirit. As can be perceived from the glorious resurrection, all goods things find their ultimate origin in the Father. Paul tells us that our bodies are mortal but through Baptism we receive the life of the Spirit. Hence we must convert ourselves to live in a life of holiness for God.

The Gospel story of the raising of Lazarus from death has the underlying theme is life and death and new life. The story opens with the announcement that Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, is ill. Jesus' immediate response is to say that this illness will not result in the death of Lazarus but that it will be an occasion for God's glory to reveal to all and for glory to come to his Son also. And, though we are told he had a deep love for Lazarus and his sisters, he remained in the same place for another two days. Eventually he announced to his disciples that they were going to Judea, the province where Jerusalem and Bethany, the home of Lazarus, were situated. The disciples immediately show their concern towards Jesus as the place was dangerous for him and people already tried to

stone him. Jesus' response is that of courage saying that the daytime is the time for getting things done; when the night comes nothing can be done. He also tells his disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep and Jesus will go there to wake him up. A little later he specifies that Lazarus was dead and it was necessary for the sake of the disciples, to see the divine power. This would provide a perfect opportunity to strengthen the faith of the disciples. The passage also tells us of the loyalty of the disciples expressed in the words of Thomas that they are willing to go with him and die with him.

By the time Jesus arrived outside Bethany, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. In those days, the common Jewish belief was that when a person died, his soul remained near the body for three days before moving on to the spiritual world or the world of the dead. The mourning rites usually lasted seven days from the time of death. When the news reached the house that Jesus was entering the village, Martha rushed out to meet him while Mary remained in the house. Fully aware of the healing powers Jesus she tells him that if he was there her brother would not have died yet she tells him that she has her trust in God and in Jesus. This meeting gives us the beautiful dialogue between the two persons where Jesus asserts with those unforgettable words: "I AM the Resurrection and the Life". This is the core statement of the whole story and is one of the seven great 'I AM' statements in John's gospel. And Jesus continues to clarify his meaning: "Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." In saying this Jesus is not only affirming that life goes beyond the grave but also that the life he gives begins here and now for all those who accept and totally assimilate his Way. It is a seamless robe that knows no end and for which physical death is only a transition. We have the magnificent faith response from Martha: "Yes, Lord. I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." She on her part believes in the divinity and messiahship of Jesus.

Next we have the encounter of Jesus with Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. She rushes out of the house to Jesus the moment she hears of his arrival from Martha and when she sees him, her response is like that of her sister: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." We now see the very human side of Jesus. Perhaps he is Messiah and Lord of life but he is surrounded by his two friends, Martha and Mary, and all their friends plunged into grief at the death of Lazarus, probably a relatively young person. We know already that Jesus was

very attached to this family. It is likely that this family provided a place of refuge when things really got too 'hot' for Jesus in nearby Jerusalem. When he sees them all weeping he himself was touched and was deeply moved and he too weeps with them. The language implies that Jesus, like the others, was sobbing deeply. This brings a reaction from people to say how much he loved Lazarus. There were the inevitable cynics who easily remark as to why he did not work a miracle to keep him alive. Soon after this Jesus moved to the tomb and asked that the stone be taken away from the entrance of the cave. Normally the entrance of the graves was covered with a large stone. That certainly got Martha's attention. She must have suspected that Jesus wanted to look at the features of His departed friend. She warns him that the body has been there for four days and must have decayed. But Jesus tells her that she would indeed see the glory of God. Jesus says a prayer of thanks to his Father for what is about to happen. It was an overwhelming closeness and the sign of God's presence in Jesus. After his prayer Jesus ordered Lazarus to come out of the grave and Lazarus receives life and comes out of the grave. The consequence of this miracle says the evangelist that many of those who had come out to mourn with Martha and Mary began to believe in Jesus.

In the entire episode, Jesus is the central figure, who challenged each participant by clarifying the central issue: the real meaning of death and life. In Bethany Jesus works this miracle and reunites Lazarus with his family. In fact the dead man now alive hobbles out and come before them whom they have to free. Paradoxically this miracle of Jesus hastens his own death since it becomes an additional reason for Jewish leaders to destroy Jesus. Ironically therefore, the death of Jesus gave true life to the world. Thus the whole story can be read as a parable of the meaning of Jesus as Christ and Lord. The raising of Lazarus is not just the resuscitation of a dead man but is a powerful symbol of the new life that all of us can undergo when we submit to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Through our Baptism we all die to sin to receive a new life of grace. Lazarus stepping from the tomb is strongly reminiscent of Paul describing the baptism of the early Christians. In this miracle Jesus manifests his supreme power over death so that we may have faith in him and his words that he said would happen to him. This is also a promise of what will happen to us after our life on earth.

Today's Gospel reading presents to us two messages. First it tells us that through our living faith in Jesus, all our physical bodies will be raised in the final

resurrection. Secondly, especially now with the approaching of Easter Sunday, we are called symbolically to resurrect ourselves from sin to grace by partaking in the Sacrament of reconciliation. It is an invitation for us to march forward faithfully in hope, knowing that those who believe in Jesus, will live forever. In raising Lazarus, Jesus manifested both his authority as the Son and his divine power. By his raising him on the fourth day, Jesus was indicating that he is master over life and death and he is able to bring back to life all of those who have died, all those holy patriarchs, Jews, and even righteous gentiles even centuries before. He is the master over life and death. Further Jesus shows us what resurrection and life really is. He wants us to recognize that resurrection and life are, more specifically a relationship with a person and that person is Christ Himself who tells us that he is the resurrection and the life. To be raised from the dead, to be fully alive, means to be in a living, loving relationship with Jesus, who teaches us that resurrection and life are a call to be united with him. The resurrection and life truly gives us the right relationship with Christ and the Spirit.

Jeremy was born with a twisted body, slow mind and had the terminal illness that could take his life any time. His Teacher Doris was tired of his presence, his restlessness, grunting noises and the entire disturbance in class. She even called his parents and told them that it is impossible for her to have him in class and he must be in a special school and not here. The parents pleaded that there was no other school close by and that Jeremy was happy to be there and he was permitted to stay. When Easter drew near, the teacher explained the death and resurrection of Jesus and told how important for each student to understand it.

She gave nineteen plastic eggs to nineteen students of her class and told them to fill it something that meant Easter for them. Next day the enthusiastic class placed its eggs and the first one was Sharon's and it had butterfly and teacher explained how butterfly comes from a caterpillar and indicates new life. Next was Sheila's presentation and it was flower and teacher said flower signifies life and here we have new life. She opened the third and it was empty and it was Jeremy's. She was sad and was about to put it aside when Jeremy said, Madam, aren't you saying anything about mine. She said look Jeremy it is empty. But Madam he said the tomb of Jesus was empty on the morning of Easter. The enemies killed him but his Father raised him. There was total silence. Just then recess bell rang and all children ran out. The teacher sat alone and cried how cruel and hard she has been and he was the only child who understood what

resurrection is, the empty tomb. In three months Jeremy died and the funeral house was surprised to see on the coffin nineteen eggs on the top of the casket and all of them empty.

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