



The Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)
March 29, 2020
John 11:1-45
The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato, Rector

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

When I read today's Gospel early last week, several things occurred to me. We need a resurrection story in our lives these days. We need a compassionate and caring God who weeps as we and so many others weep in life. We need a story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Those needs pale in comparison with how we are to find life in the midst of the darkness in which we find ourselves. The Corona Virus is sweeping the nation, and quick solutions are not readily to be found.

On one level, we are used to flipping a switch, and the lights in a room magically come on. We are accustomed to being able to make decisions about where we go and what we do without restrictions. If we pay attention to the reports on the developing Corona Virus, then, we can appreciate news which we can hardly comprehend. Our lifestyles have been turned upside down.

Over the past seven days, I have offered live streamed prayers, Monday through Friday at 10:00 and 5:00, and yesterday at noon. Why?

We need to stay connected through prayer. We need to experience church in a different way. Continuing to offer prayers through live streaming is a tangible way of connecting us as a community of faith. We are not free to worship in the beautiful St. Mark's but we are staying connected.

Some might say that the virtual reality of live streamed Services and the meeting of ministries via Zoom or GoToMeeting is a poor substitute for being face-to-face. I agree in that there is nothing better than face-to-face encounters in worship and sitting across the table from fellow parishioners involved in the ministries of St. Mark's. I disagree that the virtual reality of prayer, internet meetings and phone calls is a 'poor' substitute for Church.

We find ourselves in a new reality. We are doing what we can to navigate through the shadows of life to find and provide as much light as possible in life. We have online statistics of how many have viewed each of the twelve Services which have now been offered as live stream videos. If we were to add up all those numbers, we would be amazed at how many of us are being reached.

Those who mourned the death of Lazarus especially Martha and Mary surely were amazed that Lazarus was raised from the dead. As some of us know, the miracle is a foretaste of Jesus being raised from the dead.

Though we didn't read loud the story in Ezekiel of 'dry bones' being knit together and brought to life, Christians believe that narrative to be a foretaste of the resurrection. I know how much I need a shot of the resurrection, and yet, I know that it is not around the corner nor is it going to be celebrated as it has been at St. Mark's for 182 years. We're not there, and the anxiety, inconveniences, loneliness, suffering and even death due to COVID-19 are real. It is the reality of life for us and the entire world in which we live.

When I have seen military trucks on TV in Italy bearing the bodies of so many who have died, I shudder to try and think about the suffering which has happened and continues to happen. When I hear reports that statics are on the rise in China again, I shudder to think how that feels to our sisters and brothers in that country. When I hear what is happening in New York, in Detroit and here in Grand Rapids, I shudder to imagine where we are headed and what life may be like a few weeks from now.

Will there be in-person celebrations during Holy Week and Easter? Certainly not as in the past. Will St. Mark's offer daily Services plus the diocesan Chrism Mass in those eight days from Palm Sunday through Easter? Certainly not as in the past. That is the stark and unpleasant reality of our life as a community of faith.

The stark and unpleasant reality of the death of Lazarus was painful and sad for Martha and Mary. As deeply saddened as Jesus was upon the news of the death of Lazarus, Jesus did not go immediately. He waited. Scholars conjecture as to why. I find it puzzling that Jesus waited. Finally, the calling forth of Lazarus from the tomb after four days was perhaps even more miraculous than had Jesus gone immediately.

I need to be called forth from the tomb of the experience of day after day of staying inside and working via phone calls, live streamed prayers, emails and internet meetings. I need to be called forth and assured that this current reality will have an end. I need to be reminded that we are all in this together, and that the countries of the world are in the same boat. We are not alone, just as we are not alone in our lives of faith. As I said several times this past week, it would not be in God's nature to abandon God's creatures.

Jesus did not abandon Martha and Mary. We need to believe that God in Jesus is with us. Jesus is in the pain and the suffering which we are experiencing. Jesus is in the need for patience and adhering to the directives of the CDC, our Governor and of our Bishop. Jesus is in the creativity of parents entertaining their children day after day while also trying to work from home. Jesus is in the reality of life and calling us to himself in perhaps ways like never before. Are we listening?

We profess, "I believe in the Resurrection from the dead and the life everlasting". Martha believed that. The disciples of Jesus came to believed that. Do we believe that? Do we believe that the current struggles and darkness of life will eventually be transformed and new life will emerge?

May God give us strength to believe. May God give much needed grace to the first responders, medical personnel and social service organizations to keep them safe from harm. May God be with those whose employment has either been suspended or terminated and livelihoods taken away. May God be with those who are sick and suffering and those who will die this day. May God roll away the stone from the darkness in which we find ourselves and call us forth from that darkness into light. Amen.