

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we draw closer to Holy Week, our readings lead us deeper into the mystery of life, death and resurrection, and the hope that God gives us in Christ.

The raising of Lazarus is one of the most tender, poignant and human stories in the Gospel of John for it is not just a story about a miracle, it's also a story about friendship, grief, waiting, and hope. It's about what God is like when our hearts are breaking. It's about the human experience of loss and the divine promise that death does not have the final word.

The story begins with illness. Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, is very sick. The sisters send word to Jesus: "Lord, the one you love is ill." Notice how they describe Lazarus, not necessarily by name but as someone Jesus loves. This is a family close to Jesus. He has stayed and eaten in their home. He has shared life with them.

The sisters' message carries a quiet expectation: *Surely Jesus will come right away.* But Jesus doesn't. He does not come immediately. Rather, he waits.

From the perspective of Mary and Martha, that waiting must have been agonizing. They would have anxiously watched Lazarus grow weaker and weaker while hoping every moment that Jesus would appear.

We have probably experienced that kind of waiting. We pray for healing, but illness continues. We ask God for help, but our situation does not change. We plead for intervention, but heaven seems silent. Eventually Lazarus dies. By the time Jesus arrives, the funeral is already past, and Lazarus has been in the tomb four days.

When Martha goes out to meet Jesus, her words carry both faith and heartbreak: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” It’s a statement many believers have felt in their hearts. *Lord, if only...* If only you had intervened. If only things had been different.

Yet Martha still speaks words of faith when she says, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.” Martha’s faith is wounded but not extinguished.

And when Mary sees Jesus, she also says, “Lord, if you had been here...” There is faith in those words, but there is also sorrow, and perhaps even disappointment. The narrative does not pretend that these feelings are wrong. The gospel writer allows Martha and Mary to speak their feelings aloud. Faith is not the absence of struggle. Faith often lives right in the middle of it.

Then comes one of the most beautiful, touching moments in the Gospel of John. When Jesus sees Mary weeping, and the people around her also weeping, we are told that Jesus is deeply moved. He sees their grief, and we hear the shortest verse in the Bible: **“Jesus wept.”**

Jesus knows what he is about to do. He knows that Lazarus will soon walk out of the tomb. Yet he still weeps. Why? It is because love does not remain distant from suffering. Love enters it. The tears of Jesus tell us something about the heart of God. God is not cold or indifferent. God is compassionate. He grieves with those who grieve. In Jesus, we see a God who does not stand far away from human pain. God does not watch our suffering from a safe distance. In Christ, God steps into our grief.

When we cry at the graveside of someone we love, God is not absent. The tears we shed are shared by the heart of God. This truth matters deeply in our world filled with loss. Faith does not mean we never grieve. Faith means we know God is present in our grief.

The tears of Mary and Martha are real, but hope begins to shine through the darkness. Christian hope is not pretending that pain doesn't exist. It is trusting that pain does not have the final word.

Before going to the tomb, Jesus says something remarkable to Martha, something that is the most important declaration in the Gospel. He says to Martha, **"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."**

This is more than a promise about the future. Jesus does not say, *I will someday bring resurrection*. He says **I am** the resurrection. Jesus is revealing who he is. Life itself stands before Martha.

Resurrection is not merely an event. It is a relationship with the living Christ. Where Christ is present, life begins to overcome death. The power of resurrection has already begun ... whenever despair turns to hope...whenever hatred gives way to forgiveness...whenever someone trapped in darkness finds light again...Resurrection is happening.

The tomb of Lazarus is a cave with a stone across the entrance. Jesus gives a surprising command: "Take away the stone." Martha protests. Her brother has been dead four days. The reality of death is undeniable. The body has begun to decay. Martha's reaction is practical and understandable. But Jesus gently invites her to trust him, and gently reminds her of something deeper,

saying, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

So the stone is removed and Jesus calls out with a loud voice, **“Lazarus, come out!”**

And Lazarus walks out of the tomb, alive but still wrapped in burial cloths. The people watching must have been stunned, for this is not simply healing. This is life breaking into death. And this moment is not only about Lazarus. It is a sign of what Jesus does for all of humanity.

Although we are not sealed inside literal tombs, there are many ways people can feel buried. Some carry deep grief that never seems to lift. Some carry guilt or regret that weighs heavily on the soul. Some live with bitterness that has hardened over years. Some feel trapped by addiction, fear, loneliness, or despair. These things can feel like stones sealing us into a dark grave.

But Christ stands before the tombs of our lives and calls us by name, “Come out.” Sometimes that call is quiet. Sometimes it comes through a word of Scripture, through prayer, through a sermon, through a friend, or through a moment of unexpected grace. But the voice of Christ continues to call people out of darkness into life.

In our reading from Romans 8, Paul writes that the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in us. The same divine power that raised Christ is present in the lives of believers.

Paul contrasts two ways of living: there is life according to the flesh, and life according to the Spirit. The mind that is set on the flesh leads towards self-centeredness, fear, and separation from God. It leads towards death.

But the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace. Resurrection is not just a story we remember. It is a power shaping our lives right now because the Spirit moves us towards life – towards compassion instead of indifference, towards reconciliation instead of division, towards courage instead of fear, and towards hope instead of despair.

Where the Spirit is at work, stones begin to move and graves begin to open. Our gospel story does not end when Lazarus walks out of the tomb. Jesus says to those around him, **“Unbind him, and let him go.”**

Lazarus is alive, but he is still wrapped in grave clothes. And that is where the community comes in. This is a powerful image of the church’s calling. Christ brings people to life, but we help one another remove the grave clothes. We can help each other let go of shame, help each other heal from wounds. We can help each other to continue to believe when faith feels fragile. The Christian life is not meant to be lived alone. We are called to walk together, helping one another live in the freedom Christ gives.

Today’s gospel story comes just before the final days of Jesus’ life. If we continue with the gospel narrative and read the following verses and the next chapter in the gospel of John, we will see that the raising of Lazarus becomes one of the reasons for the authorities’ decision that Jesus must die.

The act that reveals Jesus as the giver of life leads directly toward the cross. This is the mystery of our faith. The path to resurrection passes through suffering. The victory of life comes through the sacrifice of love. As Lent draws towards Holy Week, this story prepares our hearts. It reminds us that even when darkness seems strongest, God is already at work bringing life.

So perhaps the question for us today is simple but profound: Where might Christ be calling you out of a tomb? What stone needs to be rolled away? Where might the Spirit be inviting you into deeper life?

For some, it may be releasing a burden carried for many years. For others, it may be opening the heart to forgiveness or hope again. Whatever the tomb may be, the voice of Christ still speaks. The voice that called Lazarus from death is the same voice that calls us today, saying to us, "I am the resurrection and the life."

And because of that, no darkness is final. No tomb is permanent. No stone is too heavy for the grace of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.