

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C, 2008
John 12:1-8
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The dinner at Lazarus' home, home also of his sisters Mary and Martha, took place just days before Jesus' execution. Keeping this in mind helps us understand our Lord's somewhat strange reaction to Mary's gesture, and it also helps the Evangelist, John, set the stage for the Last Supper and Judas' betrayal. But for this Sunday, the Fifth Sunday in Lent, we ought to stay focused on Mary, because what we see is a great act of love and devotion. We also have a tie in with our Lord's action at the Last Supper, when he washed the feet of his disciples and dried them with a towel. To the ancient Jews, like with modern Arabs, the feet are a "dirty" part of the body, and there is nothing lower than having to wash someone else's feet. It is an act of servanthood, and done voluntarily, it is a declaration of total devotion to the other. Placing this story in the context of our Lord's raising his host, Lazarus, from the dead, not long before, and the proximity of these events to the Cross, and we become aware of the incredible love and loyalty between our Savior and his friends. It is a relationship that transcends death, and it mirrors our relationship with Jesus, too, when we accept his love and friendship, which he freely offers.

We are now almost to the end of Lent. Next week, Holy Week begins. Holy Week will take us from the Sunday of the Passion, better known to us as Palm Sunday, through our Lord's trial, through his torturous death to the Sunday that is the basis for our faith, Easter, the Sunday of the Resurrection. Our Lord's victory over death allows us victory over sin, so that we might stand victorious with him, in friendship, forever. Lent has been a time for us to prepare for Easter, a time to contemplate our selves as children of God and to examine our lives so that we know ourselves as God knows us. Only then, as we stand revealed before the God of judgment, can we approach the Cross and lay down our burden of sin. Through faith in Jesus, who forgives us, we share his victory over the grave and gain eternal life, and we become his disciples.

John's accounts of our Lord's relationship with Lazarus, Mary and Martha, tell us that Jesus is the Lord of life, and that it is he, alone, who gives us life. We learn this in the story Lazarus being raised from the dead. Our Lord restored life to Lazarus, his friend, because he loved him. From a literary perspective as well as a theological one, it is a fore-type that points to both our Lord's resurrection and our own resurrection into eternal life. It is a magnificent story of faith, and object lesson for all who witnessed it. If you recall the story, you recall that Martha expressed great doubt that Jesus could restore life to her brother. Doubt, while natural, can not stand in place of faith. Jesus is the Lord of life. If we have faith, we gain eternal life. Jesus told Martha that he was the Lord of life. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

But while this story strengthens us in faith, there is some danger in telling it. The danger is that, as with all the biblical miracle stories, twenty-first century folk can easily get

hung up on our own understanding of science, especially biology, and in the process lose sight of the point the author of this Gospel, was trying to make. The point transcends the miracle just as it transcends our own logic and reason. The point is this: Jesus is the Lord of life. Even in death, the souls of those who believe in Jesus Christ live. Hear again the great words of hope: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

In Christ, we do not escape death, but with Christ we are victorious over death. Lent reminds us of our mortality, even as it prepares us for immortality. Lent begins with the reminder that we are made of dust and return to dust. No one escapes the experience of death. Lazarus did not escape it. His death sentence was not overturned; it was simply stayed. Yet for the Christian, death is not the final answer. Jesus assured us that if we believe in him our souls live on. This is the essence of Christian faith. God loved the world so much that he sent his Son. Anyone who believes that Jesus is the Son of God has eternal life. That is straight from John 3:16. Saint Paul once said that if there is no resurrection, then our faith is that of fools and our hope is in vain, but he hastened to add that we are not fools and our hope is not in vain, because Jesus Christ indeed rose from the dead. It seems to me that to deny the resurrection is to deny life of any lasting meaning.

An early, 7th Century English theologian and historian, known as the Venerable Bede, once said this about Christian belief in eternal life. He said that to imagine life without Christ, you should imagine a great wooden hall in the countryside, alone in the darkness of an English bog, during a dark winter night. Not a star shines in the sky; there is no glow from the moon, just darkness. But, there is the light of two open windows, on either side of the hall, because inside, the hall is lit brightly, as for a banquet. Now, Bede said, try to imagine that a bird is flying through the darkness and sees the lighted window. Attracted to the light, the bird flies into the open window and immediately, startled and frightened, it flies out the opposite window. Bede said that life without Christ is analogous to that bird: eternal darkness interrupted by a fleeting moment of light and then darkness forever more. Without Christ, we are born of nothing and return to nothing, and life, so brief, has no meaning. You can whitewash the Christian doctrine, but if you remove the hope of eternal life in Christ, there is nothing left.

The close of Lent is near. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the Sunday of the Passion. Two weeks from today, we celebrate the greatest day in the Church year and the greatest event in the entirety of history, the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord. Let us look forward, in joy, to the celebration of our Lord's Resurrection, knowing that in faith we will share the Resurrection with him. *Amen*

