

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, A, 2017

- 1. This is the longest narrative in the entire Gospel of John aside from the account of Jesus' passion, and so there must be an important message here.**

It is somewhat strange, however, that we do not find this story of Lazarus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke or in any other New Testament books.

Actually there are 2 men named Lazarus in the New Testament: one is a pitiable man whose life on earth was burdened by illness, poverty and the indifference of a rich land lord; this first Lazarus died and discovered that his share of eternity would be characterized by a complete reversal of fortune.

The second Lazarus speaks to us in today's gospel, although he doesn't say a word.

In reality, it is more accurate to say that Lazarus was resuscitated since he would still die another day.

And yet the death of Lazarus brings out a deeply hidden anger & resentment that people feel @ death.

The usually pleasant Mary grumbled to Jesus: "If you had been here, he wouldn't have died."

The practical Martha prodded Jesus to do something @ her brother's death: But even now, you can change things," she says.

One of the friends complained: Why didn't Jesus stop death from happening?

We know exactly how they felt.

We also want to know why my wife died so young or why my brother suffered so much or why we have to die at all.

Couldn't God have found a better transition from earth to heaven?

Death will never be easy and no amount of rationalizing takes away the sting.

While there are 1000s of books written @ life, you can be sure that there is an anxiety @ death, where there is only a trickle of books written about that experience.

Still, the approach we take towards anything determines the way we experience that thing.

We say that the dead have departed, while Africans say they have arrived.

It is true: each of us is on a journey and no one of us knows where our journey will lead us.

My Mother, a few days before she died, said to no one in particular in her hospital room: Who would have thought that it would end this way? And, she was right: We don't know how it will end for each of us.

The most important thing is, however, not that we die, but how we die.

*After all, life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.*

We live in awe of the breath-taking promise of God that resurrection is a reality awaiting each of us and all of us.

Sometimes promises take a while to reach completion.

Promise-keeping and believing demands patience and trust and faith.

Today's readings tell us we can really count on the God who has made these promises throughout salvation history.

Do we believe this? Do we believe this key component of our Christian faith?

**2. Again, it is all about perspective. A story that I have used at funeral homilies speaks to what we can expect.**

We stand upon the sea shore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze & moves softly out to the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength. I stand and look at her until at length she stands like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come down to mingle with one another. Then someone at my side exclaims: Look, she is gone. Gone where? Gone from my sight that is all. She is just as large in mast and hull as she ever was. Her diminished size lies in me, not her. And at the very moment when someone at my side exclaims, "Look, she is gone," there are other eyes eagerly watching her approach and other voices ready to take up the glad shout: "look, she is coming. Look, she is coming home."

Again, as the Africans say: she has arrived.  
Again, it is all about perspective.

**3. These are issues to which we wish to have concrete answers, and not merely abstract ones.**

I suppose that is why Jesus became human and taught us through his example how to live life as well as how to face death.

He too was afraid of the agony that awaited him; he even asked his heavenly Father to take this cup, this painful death, away from him.

*I will never understand why Jesus had to pay for our sins by dying on the cross,*

But my best guess is: it was the Father's and Jesus' way of showing the depth of their love for us.

And yet a lack of total understanding should not shake our belief in Jesus & His promises.

A little girl who didn't want her father to leave her at bed time because she was afraid was not consoled when her father said: Don't be afraid. God is here with you all night, even though you cannot see him." She replies "But I want you to stay, Daddy. I need a god with skin on him.

And that's exactly what we have in Jesus: a God with skin on him.  
A God who shows us how to live life and face death.

We do not want just an idea about God when we are hurting.  
We do not need theological and scholarly explanations when we are facing the unknown.

**We want a God with a skin on him;** a God who explains things through his words & example.

Still we do not like to talk @ death. When I went to our Dominican cemetery in Benicia, California, with my parents and showed them various burial sights, my Mother finally said: You choose, Danny (my baptismal name is Daniel). Frankly, I really don't feel like shopping any more.

Scan the newspaper in time of war and count the euphemisms for the dead: they speak of casualties, collateral damage, losses.

Instead of a willingness to face death, we have a society dedicated to botoxing and coloring away the stamp of aging from our bodies and a cult of youth that celebrates only one end of life and disparages, even denies, the other.

At a recent funeral of her husband, a woman proclaimed in total disbelief, "It never occurred to me that Eddie would die." But how could it not occur to her that someone would not die, after all, all of us are marked for death, and bound for it, from the moment we are conceived?

#### **4. Clearly, the living Christ stands today, calling people into new life.**

Christ stands there crying out as he did so long ago: Lazarus come out. Now he cries out: Joseph come out. Kristen come out. Denis come out.

Jesus is summoning us all to come out of our tombs so that he might unbind us & we can start living again.

It is only when we come out of our tombs, allowing that which binds us to fall to the ground that we can regain our innocence, our knack for living & become truly ourselves.

Once again, life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away. But still, even though we have a god with skin on him, still we would like a more full picture of what the other side is like. I'm afraid, my friends, that we will never have a complete understanding of our passage from this life to the next.

However to this end, I would like to retell a true story of a man facing death who visited a doctor friend who he knew to be a strong Christian. He kept asking his friend: what is it like on the other side? The doctor thought a bit. Since he had his office in one part of his house, he could hear his dog scratching at the door, wanting to come in. He then opened the door and his dog excitedly starting jumping all over the doctor. He told his friend; you see my dog here, well, he's never been in my office before and yet he knew that he had a friend on the other side of that door and that's all he really cared about. Our friend Jesus is on the other side of the door and that's all that we really need to know. Our focus in life is to develop an ever deeper friendship with our God.

And so I have to ask: what greater breathe taking moment is there than to receive an invitation from our friend Jesus who invites us into His home, so that we can spend all of eternity with Him and all those whom we love....