

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent 2010

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My mother is still going strong at age 95. When I call her, if I can ever find her in her room at the assisted living, it is a great joy to hear her voice. She doesn't quite recognize mine. She always thinks I'm my brother, Tom, but after a while, we get that sorted out and she knows who I am. Even though my mother is in good health, her age of 95 has me on edge as I wait for the emergency call that says "come at once, mom doesn't have much more time." Those are the dreaded calls we receive when someone we love is close to death or has unexpectedly died. There we stand in shocked silence, perhaps in tears, numb with the news that once again Death is dealing its hand, robbing us of a loved one. And as prepared as we may think we are to receive the call, we never really are.

I wonder if that is how Jesus felt when he received the news that his friend, Lazarus, was near death, when he heard Mary and Martha's message "Come at once, your friend does not have much more time to live. He is gravely ill." (I like to think that Jesus' delay of a few days is a Johannine editorial comment and not what Jesus did to "show off" when he arrived in Bethany).

In a way I always dread the call to preach on this Gospel of the raising of Lazarus. It's really too much for the mind and heart to bear. It calls us to believe in the unbelievable. That someone could bring back a person who had been in the grave, decomposing for four days. It calls us to feel with Martha and Mary the heartbreaking disappointment when all our hopes for a loved one's recovery have been shattered. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." This gospel passage is just too much for the mind and heart to bear.

And that is why it is so important for those who are elected, those moving towards the sacrament of baptism, to hear this incredible story. For whether you realize it or not, you, Ian, Mike, Brad are Lazarus in this story. You are the ones who are the friends of Jesus, whom he loves. That may seem even more incredible to you than Jesus' raising a man from the grave, bringing him back to life. It may be easier for you to believe in this heaven and earth shattering occurrence than to believe in the simple reality that you are called

to be a friend of Jesus, beloved of Jesus, so valued that Jesus has given his life so that you might have life.

If there are calls we receive that leave us silent, numb, or in tears because of the death of a loved one, the call we hear today in this Gospel is the inverse of that disturbing call. Jesus calls in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."

Can you imagine what it was like for Lazarus to hear again the voice of a friend? Through time and space. Past the bounds of death, a voice is heard calling his name, drawing him out of the cold earth. He heard the voice of his friend Jesus, calling him, saying rise, come out. Come back to life! Lazarus' "comeback" is astonishing, awe-inspiring on one level but on another it's about "friendship." It's the bond of love and friendship that draws Lazarus back. Isn't this ultimately what makes the story so powerful for us who hear the story 2000 years later? We may not have the power "over the grave." We cannot do what Jesus did in a physical sense but we have the power to call a friend "out of the grave" of spiritual death. We can call someone we love from the tomb of spiritual death. We have the power to love, to forgive, to call someone we love into the light, especially if that person is overwhelmed by darkness and even despair.

Who are the people in your own life who need to hear your voice calling them? Who need to hear, "Here I am! I am for you." Maybe it's you who need to hear a voice, someone reaching through time and space to say, my love and friendship is what will unbind you and give you life. If you can touch that experience of calling or being called out, "Come back" then you may know how much the more this Jesus desires to call each of us out of the darkness of sin and death. Jesus desires nothing more than to be your friend.

You elect, who are to be baptized this Easter. In a few minutes we will ask you again to kneel or prostrate yourself on the cold earth. We are humbled by your willingness to be for us a symbol of dying to sin and rising to new life. It is the voice of Jesus who calls you from the cold earth to rise and be free; it is the Jesus who desires only to be your friend.