

Fifth Sunday in Lent
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March 9, 2008
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 130;
Romans 8:6–11; John 11: 1–45

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There once was a journey I was loathe to take. It wasn't the journey itself, driving from Gettysburg to Toronto, Canada, that caused my reluctance. It was what awaited me in Toronto.

What I was facing was the oral examination and defense of my doctoral dissertation. The smaller part of me was excited at the prospect of passing the examination. But by far, the greater part of me was filled with trepidation and the fear of failure. I was only too familiar with the stories of candidates whose dissertations had been painfully and slowly dissected by examiners who then pronounced them failures. I was not looking forward to what awaited me at the end of my journey.

But then, we are all faced with such journeys in our lives, are we not? Going to the medical specialist's office to hear the results of test and scans which may have serious consequences for our future. Traveling to the Internal Revenue Service offices to appear for a tax audit. And, of course, the final journey we must all take, dying.

It is journeying such as this that is at the heart of this morning's gospel, although it is easily missed if we are not paying close attention. The story of Lazarus is one of wonder and amazement. He suffers a terrible illness that takes his life, but Jesus arrives and returns his life to him.

Anyone of us who has faced a life threatening illness, who has been told that they only have a certain period of time to live, know what it is to hope and pray for a Lazarus type miracle, preferably before we die.

But the gospel lesson we read this morning also addresses Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. It will be His final journey and will end with His trial, punishment, and crucifixion. So it is that it is appropriate for us to carefully consider exactly what we are being told in this story of Lazarus as we approach Passion Sunday, Holy week, and Good Friday.

For Jesus, surely this journey was one of anguish and hope. Could that be what lay behind Jesus' reaction to the news of the illness suffered by Lazarus? Mary and Martha wasted no time in calling for a personal favor from a beloved friend of his. And given what we know of Jesus' power to heal we would expect, would we not, some form of immediate healing.

But, according to Jesus, the illness of Lazarus or its cure is not really what is at stake. Rather, it is the opportunity presented by the event to glorify God and Jesus Himself. So it is that we are invited into a deeper level of understanding the story.

The profound issue of faith is at stake. That trust in God and His presence and power, despite the fact that at times it may seem to be absent, is desperately necessary. For Mary and Martha what counts is the healing presence of the divine so that their brother might be made well.

But surely, their need is ours in similar circumstances. We too seek the presence of divine healing when illness threatens us or those we love. But is this what the divine healing presence is really about, simply responding to our personal needs as they arise? Certainly not. And this is underscored by Jesus not responding immediately to the request, but by continuing with what He has been doing for the next two days.

This is not to exclude faith, but to emphasize it. You see, faith is confidence that God is love and life, and that if we set our sights on God's purposes rather than our own, then, amazing things can happen. Faith remains open to the possibility for God to intervene. So it is that Jesus demonstrates His unshakable faith in His Father's will and power. He can finish what He is doing and not put Lazarus in jeopardy.

But then, we too are invited to live in that self same faith, that self-same trust. Jesus will not only draw on this faith before He goes to Lazarus, but He will call on it again when He faces the ordeal before Him in Jerusalem. The reality is that Jesus relies on a divine timetable, His father's will, not simply on the basis of human need as it comes before Him.

However, when Jesus does announce to His disciples His intention to go to Bethany, to Mary, Martha and Lazarus, they are appalled. Bethany is hostile territory and to return there would be to court being stoned to death. Jesus tries to help them understand, but His talk of Lazarus sleeping only further confirms them in their belief. Then Jesus dumfounds them by announcing that Lazarus isn't asleep at all, he's dead! But when they journey with Him to Bethany they will find themselves enabled to believe, for not only will they witness the resurrection of Lazarus, they will be prepared for a death and resurrection yet to come – that of Jesus Himself.

And this is the other side of faith. We are never completely forsaken. The power of God, the presence of Christ, may seem to linger in other places than our own for the longest time. But such absence is always temporary; we are never completely ignored or forgotten.

Finally Jesus arrives, but not to a warm and joyful reception. He is met by misunderstanding, disbelief, and outright opposition. Martha goes out to meet Him while Mary stays at home. Martha immediately expresses her disappointment that Jesus had not come earlier and boldly states her belief in life after death. But for Martha, it's all over.

Martha goes back home and returns with Mary. Mary's departure alerts the mourners outside their house and they too set off to find themselves brought face to face with Jesus. Mary repeats Martha's words of disappointment. Clearly it's too late for anything other than a funeral. All Mary, Martha and the mourners can do is weep, and Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

The Greek terms used in the story carry the notion that Jesus was both angry and distressed. He was surrounded by the evidence of death and knew how much its power was firmly in place.

And then something remarkable occurs. When Jesus asked where Lazarus had been laid, the disciples reply, “Come and see.”

Do you remember the two disciples who followed Jesus after hearing John the Baptist’s testimony? They followed Jesus and wanted to know where He was staying and He invited them into discipleship with the words, “Come and see.” Now those words are turned upon Jesus Himself, for most certainly the hour has come. So Jesus goes to the tomb and calls Lazarus out of the grave into the fullness of life. In the midst of all the trappings of death, heartbreaking grief, and the smell of death, Jesus speaks and acts, and there is life. At this point in the story it is next to impossible to think of solely of Lazarus.

The tomb, the burial cloths being cast aside, the emergence of one raised from the dead, immediately lead us to think of Jesus and what lies ahead of Him. In the words of Fred Craddock, one of the great preachers of our time, “Lazarus left the tomb, but the price was that Jesus had to enter it.” But then, what was true for Lazarus is true for us, thanks be to God. Come and see. Let us gather once more at the table of our Lord to find ourselves forgiven, restored, and assured once more of life after our death. Until, in the end, in God’s good time, we find ourselves in the Kingdom and gifted with eternal life. Such was Jesus’ journey that His journey might be ours.

Oh, and my journey, the one to Toronto. My dissertation was approved, and my graduation scheduled.

Amen.