

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year A)

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It has been said that we read biographies not to learn about others, but to learn about ourselves. As we discover the strengths and weaknesses of others, their insights, their obsessions, their neglects, their triumphs, we discover more about our own lives as well – warts and all. We recognize ourselves in those about whom we read.

I have seen any number of examples of this within our own lifetime. In fact, one such instance occurred on this very date in 1959. On March 22 of that year, Martin Luther King, Jr., gave what many consider one of his finest sermons, remarking on the difference it made to him reading about Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi studied the life of Jesus, and though not a Christian himself, found Jesus' life story one that profoundly changed the direction of his own life. King, in turn, found Gandhi's story one that deeply changed *him* – and, of course, we all have been changed by King's remarkable life story.

This is also very much true in Bible stories. Think about it. The prodigal son, the good Samaritan, faithful Joseph, poor Job – we are *there* in the stories. And so it is with the story we have just heard, the story of the raising of Lazarus.

As John tells the story, we are drawn into the details. For instance, we can't help but notice how *different* Christ is here than in the other three Gospels. A request comes from Lazarus' sisters, and we do not find the “immediately” that so punctuates Mark, or the “at once” of Matthew. Jesus follows his own clock and calendar in responding to the sisters' request. When Jesus does come, the sisters greet his arrival with news that he's too late: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Is that not a familiar litany to us? Most of us have expressed such thoughts in these past few weeks. We “armchair quarterback” all that's happened since February 28 in Iran and the Middle East. And we feel helpless – disappointed –

angry. And we wonder: “What if??” “What if” another path had been taken... “If only” the President had shown more patience. “If only” diplomacy had been given a better chance.

This is far from the only example, of course. A natural part of the human journey is the road of “if only...”

- If only I’d studied harder.
- If only I’d taken Grandpa to the doctor.
- If only I’d done something sooner.
- If only, if only, if only.

Regret lives in grief’s shadow.

Certainly the early church recognized this story. Living with sometimes violent loss was a daily reality in those days when being a Christian was a capital offense. Death, in general, came more quickly and much younger to people of that time, when modern methods of intervening were centuries from being developed. Still, we share the story of grief. We know that to live is to know disappointment and loss, anger and despair. To live is to let go – and letting go isn’t easy.

Reading a story like this, though, we find a mirror held up to more than just our anger and our grief. Hope is also there.

“Do you believe in the resurrection?” asked Jesus. “Sure, on the last day,” says the sister. Jesus gently corrects her theology. “No, not the last day,” says Jesus. “NOW!” I am the resurrection and the life – not in the future tense – but NOW!

In these few, simple words, Jesus redefined hope. Not “by and by” as “sweet” as that may be – but NOW. NOW is where Christ is, bringing with him Resurrection power. Look to the stories that unfold in Acts and the Epistles. Many are the instances where Christ’s followers *needed* Resurrection NOW in the face of persecutions, imprisonments, and even martyrdom. As the Church’s story continued to unfold in the centuries to follow, we saw it repeatedly. In the lion’s den, the catacombs, in the marketplace, at the graveside. And now, we see

that need all the more: In a hospital ward in the Middle East. In an embassy or on an air base. The Gospel is always preached in the present tense.

One detail of this story that's always fascinated me is the point in it where Jesus cries. Remember how I said a few moments ago that Jesus, as portrayed in John, is different from what we see in Matthew, Mark, and Luke? The whole area of *emotion* is one of these differences. There's a stoicism to John's version of Jesus – an emotionless, “always in control” sense to him. Thus, to find tears and anguish in John's Jesus is significant. It's almost like John highlights this verse with one of those big, fat, yellow highlighters. “See how he loved him!”

And yet, to just look at that is to still miss the point. John always has a deeper meaning in his telling of a story, and this story is no exception. Fred Craddock notes in his commentary on this passage that it is this story that sets the stage for Holy Week in John's Gospel. There is no Garden of Gethsemane in John. The raising of Lazarus is that “last straw” that drives the religious establishment “over the edge.” By raising Lazarus *out* of the tomb, Jesus sealed his own fate of ending up *in* one.

But look! Look! There's something else! Think about it for a moment. What does this Lazarus story sound like?

- A dead body, days in a tomb.
- A shout of victory,
- a stone rolled away,
- grave clothes left behind,
- a dead man comes to life...

Sound familiar? Hold the page to the light and another narrative bleeds through. The resurrection of Jesus is *foreshadowed* in the raising of Lazarus! We have a story here that transcends the visible moment! Lazarus's story is caught up in Christ's story.

And so are ours. Our names, too, belong to the story. Our stories – with all their anger and pain, tragedy and frustration – are ultimately triumph stories. The bottom line is triumph – Christ's triumph. He triumphed over Lazarus' death. And

we have to have the faith to look far enough ahead to see Christ's ultimate triumph in *our* present story. This war, this conflict, and the disruption it has brought us all, misguided though it may be, will not last forever. And, I believe, we have the hope of emerging a stronger people and better prepared for the *next* crisis if we learn some Resurrection lessons in how we handle this one.

We have read this biography, not to learn about Lazarus, not even to learn about Jesus, but to learn about *ourselves*. It's a story that reminds us powerfully: we find *our* name in the story. As the Passion story unfolds over the next two weeks, thus shall it be. We are there. The story is not just about Jesus – it's about us. Us – even now, even in these unprecedented times. Look for Resurrection. It is there – I promise you. Amen.