

[Spirituality](#)

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When the Gospel of John contrasts walking in the day to walking at night, we know it refers to more than getting home before curfew. What may surprise us in today's readings is that the story of the raising of Lazarus is designed to lead us to examine our own faith as disciples. Raising someone from the dead is the greatest feat of our scriptural tradition, it only happened about 10 times. But in the story of Lazarus the miracle and even Lazarus himself get short shrift compared to Jesus' interactions with disciples. In John's telling, discipleship was more important than Jesus' wonder-working, and while miracles are always a nice surprise, growth in faith usually involves significant struggle.

The first phase of the challenge for the disciples comes when Jesus says he is ready to return to Judea — the area they had just left because people were preparing to stone him. Thomas speaks for the group saying in effect, "Are you stark raving mad?!" (John's more respectful translation reads: "Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?") Jesus' response is a typical Christ-like conundrum, "If you walk in the day, you won't stumble," a statement so blatantly obvious that the disciples have to puzzle out what it really means. Another way to say it is, "When you walk by the light of the world you won't stumble, but if you walk on the dark side, the light is not in you."

By inviting the disciples to go with him, Jesus is effectively saying that when they walk in his way his own inner light will dwell in them. Thomas didn't quite get the whole import of that promise, but he did know where he stood. If Jesus were determined to head toward danger, he wouldn't leave him to do it alone: "Let us also go to die with him." If love and loyalty count for faith, Thomas had plenty of it. Walking with the light of the world would fill in the gaps.

The second phase of the discipleship challenge came with Martha's interaction with Jesus. While the Gospels don't underline the fact, it's usually women who push Jesus to more: the Syrophenician argued for a cure for her daughter; Jesus' mother called for wine before "his hour;" and in this incident, Martha and Mary both let him know, "If you had been here, our brother would not have died." But Martha didn't stop with what hadn't happened, she added her own open-ended request: "I know that God will do whatever you ask."

So far Martha has recognized Jesus as a dear friend, a late-coming healer and one whose prayers get answered. When Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise, she hears that as a traditional teaching. Explaining that her concept encompasses only a miniscule portion of God's offer he says, "I am the resurrection and the life ... Do you believe this?" Martha's response, theologically correct as it sounded, didn't begin to grasp the depth of Jesus' meaning. Thus, when he called for opening the tomb, she betrayed her lingering belief in the uncompromising power of death: "Lord, there will be a stench." But Jesus, Son of the God who promised to open the graves of the people, called Lazarus back into life.

Jesus had told Thomas and friends that with him, they could walk in his light, which meant that they could be with him in facing down death. They took that on like brave Marines: *semper fi*. At least at that moment, nothing would deter them. Jesus wanted Martha to go a step further, to realize that God is the God of life. Death does not exist for God, at least not as tragedy, not as the defining limit of life, not as punishment, and therefore, not with the meaning the world ascribes to it.

Jesus said that perceiving the light of the world opens us to allowing that light to live in us, so too he tells us that we who believe, even if we die will live, and the life he gives can never be touched by death. Knowing Jesus as the resurrection and the life changes everything. In Paul's language, it moves us from the realm of the flesh into the realm of the spirit. The story of the raising of Lazarus offers a variety of models of discipleship. John presents those who saw the restoration of life and came to

believe. Then there's Thomas and friends whose simple, sincere faithfulness would put them on the path to living in Jesus' light. Finally we have Martha, invited to let Jesus be not just the teacher, healer and Messiah she expected, but the one who offered her his very life. Discipleship is a journey we're invited to take in the light of the God of life.

### **EZEKIEL 27:12-14**

This reading comes from the end of Ezekiel's most famous and graphic passage: the scene in which God transforms the blanched, broken skeletons of the chosen people with the life of the divine Spirit. Although the vision of the dry bones being vivified is wonderfully dramatic Ezekiel's conclusion turns out to be even more so.

Ezekiel's people have given up. Nothing is left of their communal hopes. Like a family who scavenge through the rubble of their flooded out home, all they see is death, moldy debris they prefer not to touch. Then comes the word of the Lord. While the people mourn over their graves, God says, "I will open them up." It's a scandalous offer. Only God would consider entering into loving contact with the remains that have been so reverently yet thoroughly removed from the realm of ordinary experience. But what a depressed and dejected people see as irremediable decay is in God's eyes nothing less than the dust of the earth from which to form a new humanity.

On one hand this prophecy looks back to the creation story, reminding the people that all life comes from the breath of God. At the same time, Ezekiel proclaims a new exodus in which God will lead the people out of the realm of death into the life of their promised land. Most importantly, his message is that the people have done nothing to deserve this. It is God's free gift with no strings attached. All they need to do is accept God's offer and follow God's lead. That is summed up in the last line in which God declares: "I have said it, and I will do it."

### **ROMANS 8:8-11**

In this selection Paul reminds the Romans of who they are at the deepest level of their being. He's addressing the question of what literally gives them life and therefore what motivates them to do what they do and be who they are. Paul's famous contrast is between flesh and spirit — a distinction that has been degraded

and misunderstood through the ages in more ways than we would want to consider. Most of those misinterpretations tend to denigrate the weak and changing body, fallible senses and shameful desires in favor of the “spiritual side” of humanity.

But what Paul is talking about in his contrast of flesh and spirit is one’s basic orientation in life. Being “in the flesh” is self-centered, subconsciously but irrevocably oriented to the processes of degeneration and death. People who live that approach to life “cannot please God” because they have opted out of the realm of God’s influence; they have no room in their lives for anything bigger than their bellies. (See Philippians 3:19.) The religious way of “being in the flesh” may focus almost exclusively on obedience to the law and / or saving one’s soul, an approach to life that is individualistic and ultimately egocentric.

Being “in the spirit,” on the other hand is first of all a grace, an undeserved but joyfully received gift of God which flows over into a life of love of God and others. Being “in the spirit” is a reciprocal relationship. Because the Spirit of God dwells in us, we actually live in God as well. Not only has God given us life, but we share, like Christ, in God’s own life. We are not “of the flesh” — not because we reject anything of creaturely existence, but because we are oriented to much more. Being “in the spirit” is a way of life that helps us take our place in the midst of creation in the process of being “set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

Paul’s teaching about being “in the spirit” is profoundly humbling and intensely freeing. The greatest challenge of this reading is to believe that we who have been called to share in Christ’s life have absolutely nothing to worry about. That is the freedom of the children of God.

## **JOHN 11:1-45**

The raising of Lazarus is the last of Jesus’ signs in John’s Gospel and the last of the signs we will contemplate during Lent. Surprisingly, the actual miracle of raising the dead man takes up only seven of the 45 verses of this passage. Instead of spotlighting Jesus as the miracle worker, John invites us to situate ourselves with the disciples as they grapple with Jesus’ self-revelation in word and deed. We can both learn from and be comforted by their feeble understanding and growing commitment to Jesus.

We begin with the disciples who have escaped Jerusalem with Jesus because his enemies were ready to stone him. A few days after hearing of Lazarus' illness, Jesus decided to go to Bethany, just when everyone assumed it was too late to do more than mourn. Evaluating the circumstances, Thomas speaks out as the master of practicality: "You want to go to Judea? Back there? Now? Do you recall your last visit?" Of course Jesus' response took the question to an entirely different level of meaning.

First of all, indicating that his own time was limited, he explained to the disciples that they had to work while it was still possible. His "day" had 12 "hours" and they were not all used up. As far as the disciples were concerned, Jesus wanted them to understand that they could walk in his light and not fall apart. In fact, walking in his light meant that his light would be in them, independent of the rising and setting of the sun or even his physical presence. Then reprising a theme he had used in regard to the man born blind (John 9), Jesus reminded them that Lazarus' death, something they perceived as the result of sin or an irreversible tragedy, was actually the setting for a revelation of God's glory. He even said it was good that he hadn't been there because they needed to understand that his work had to do with transforming the human condition, not simply curing disease. This served as a gentle introduction to help them understand his passion as glory.

Thomas replied by calling the disciples to what was probably the best they could offer at the moment: "Let us also go to die with him." In this, Thomas, called Didymus, was acting as the identical twin to all who are called to grow in faith; he demonstrated that his loyalty went far beyond his comprehension. He didn't understand that Jesus' "hour" would bring glory or that Lazarus' death would bring a deeper revelation of who Jesus was, but Thomas had enough love to be willing to stand with Jesus in spite of obvious danger. That was an expression of faith, not in a theological or even intellectual sense, but in a much more concrete way, saying in effect, "I have no idea where it is leading, but I trust you more than anyone or anything else, so I will remain with you." This is a parallel to Peter's proclamation: "Master, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). So with fearful faith, they accompany Jesus to Bethany.

Martha's conversation with Jesus takes the exploration of faith a few steps farther. First she recognizes him as a healer — although she reminds him that in that capacity he arrived too late to do much good. She follows her complaint with the ambiguous statement: "Whatever you ask of God, God will give you." When Jesus

replies “Your brother will rise again,” Martha hears the sort of cliché frequently offered to people who are grieving; it’s effectively a call to ignore real anguish and take a “spiritual view” that discounts the hole in the heart of the bereaved. But that’s hardly the intent of Jesus for whom this moment was so perturbing and troubling that he wept openly.

Far from being a platitude, Jesus’ assurance that Lazarus would rise was the prelude to an “I am” statement: Jesus’ declaration that he is the resurrection and the life. As with all of those statements, Jesus reveals who he is in order to explain what that means for others. He offers Martha a paradoxical proverb contrasting the ordinary and deep meanings of life and death. In the first half Jesus says that belief in him vitiates ordinary death and gives real life. In the second he adds that belief in him transforms ordinary life such that it is no longer subject to mortal limitation.

Jesus asks if Martha believes, and she responds that she believes he is the Christ. She doesn’t say she understands it, just that she believes. So Jesus takes her one step farther, he takes her to face the grave. Raising Lazarus becomes the sign that in him, death has no power. Believing in Jesus, walking with him with more trust than understanding, is the journey of discipleship, the route of living in the light of Christ, the resurrection and the life.

## **Planning: 5th Sunday of Lent**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

In today’s Gospel story of the raising of Lazarus, we are confronted with a crucial question that Jesus asked Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

As its placement in John’s Gospel suggests, this account is a clear foreshadowing of the Easter event that would soon follow. The question Jesus asks is not just about Lazarus but also about himself. Faith in the Resurrection is key to Christianity.

This goes beyond simply believing that Christ rose from the dead, for our religion rests on the pattern of death and resurrection at every stage of our lives. When we celebrate the third scrutiny today with the elect, we are challenging them to base their lives on that motif, to be willing to embrace the multiple deaths that love demands with the faith that new life will arise each time we cast ourselves into the hands of our loving and life-giving God. We know of course, that as we challenge the elect, we also challenge

ourselves, for we are all on the same journey of ever deepening conversion.

Whether you combine the scrutiny petitions with the general intercessions or pray them separately, you might focus some of the general intercessions around this theme. There are many groups in our society who find hope difficult: refugees, immigrants, the unemployed, LGBTQ people, minorities, etc. You might pray a petition for each group that they may trust in God's power and come to new life beyond their struggles.

The petitions for the scrutiny could include similar language. As you name the evils we must confront, pray for new life to replace each of them. As you name the good that needs to be strengthened, pray for the grace to trust in God's ability to bring life even out of death, to lift up our efforts by divine power.

Planners might also ask themselves this week if they are ready to embrace new life after all the work required to prepare Lenten and Easter liturgies. The deaths we must embrace are often tied to surrendering our time and energy for the sake of others. Providing good liturgy to parish assemblies is not easy, and it often requires dying to our own needs and desires for the sake of the common good. Do we trust that God will bring us to new life, even in the midst of our demanding efforts? Are we open to the ways that God may surprise us, giving us new life and hope in unexpected ways? If so, then we may be able to share in the joy of Lazarus and the new life of Christ's resurrection.

## **Prayers: 5th Sunday of Lent**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

This Lenten season invites us to explore the meaning of life — our lives here and now and life after death. In a world where many have so little while a few have so much, we are called to embrace life as well as to ensure that precious resources are available for the most vulnerable. Mindful of the fragile balance in our earthly life, we place our faith in Christ's resurrection and the promise of life everlasting upon death.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you responded to Mary's concern for Lazarus: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you raised Lazarus from the dead: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to believe in everlasting life: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** My friends, let us pray for our world and the people and places where life is fragile and tenuous.

**Minister** For the church: that it may guide us as we seek answers about life and death ... as a penitent people, we pray,

- For peace in a world where many invest in war and in instruments of death ... as a penitent people, we pray
- For those who work to sustain life in all its forms ... as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who tragically seek death as an escape from life's pain and suffering ... as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who accompany others who are dying or grieving: for counselors, medical professionals and those working in hospice or the funeral industry ... as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who are afraid to die or who fear dying alone ... as a penitent people, we pray,
- For the courage to move toward death with faith in the unknown ... as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those among us in any kind of need, especially the sick and the dying ... as a penitent people, we pray,

**Presider** God of life: We come to you as people confident in your love yet unsure about the future. We see the need for life-giving efforts all around us. Though we have heard your word about what is to come, we need encouragement. We ask for hope and faith in Jesus, who goes before us into everlasting life. Amen.

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