

The Fifth Sunday in Lent – 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:1-11

John 11:1-53

We have been through this before. We, the One, Holy, Christian and Apostolic Church, we have been through this before. Tuberculosis, measles, small pox, polio, rubella, Spanish Flu, bubonic plague, Black Death – we have walked this road before, we have faced this dragon, we have dealt with contagion.

It may not be in your deep memory, but it is true; we have been through this before. The lion-hearted were raised up, the hired hand showed danger his backside, and the faithful prayed. The church has seen this before. Not through the computer, not with wall-to-wall news coverage, nor with the highly advanced medical technology at our disposal, but the church has been through this before. It may not be in your deep memory, but we have a history in this department.

Luther endured a plague. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1527 the bubonic plague swept into Wittenberg. The governor of that area, Elector John of Saxony, ordered Luther and his fellow professors to leave Wittenberg for Jena. Luther defied the order and stayed, with the town pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen, to minister to the sick and frightened people. We have been through this before. Frightened and sick, the world needs something larger than itself, something larger than corona virus, larger than death. God is the only thing larger than this. Christ's church is the only vessel with a message for the world, a message of hope and strength and promise. Christ's church is to hush the tumult of fear and give courage to the world. We have done it before.

St. Paul reminds us: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor. 15:19). The lion-hearted who have been through this before showed the world where their hope was found. Love for Christ, love for those who suffered moved them to nurse the sick when everyone else abandoned them. Where does that love come from? Where does that courage come from? From where does that selflessness originate? Lazarus knows. Mary and Martha know. Everyone in the ancient town of Bethany, they knew. They saw it all.

The tender distress signal came to Jesus. "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:3). It was enough to summon the Master immediately. It was understood; at such a call He will come. "Make haste, O God, to deliver me; make haste to help me, O Lord" (Psalm 70:1). It is uncharacteristic... Jesus delays. Mary and Martha were both bewildered by such a seemingly cold response. "If only you had been here!" Their words are equally mournful and disappointed. But now Lazarus was indeed dead. "Lord, he whom you love is dead, entombed." Jesus chose Lazarus' tomb to reveal Himself for what He is. As a precursor to His entrance into Jerusalem, as a prelude to the crucifixion, Jesus chose Lazarus' tomb to make a divine statement!

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" (John 11:40). And then God revealed Himself. Then the Author of Life unleashed His Word, an authoritative Word, a Word tied to His cross. "Lazarus, come out" (John 11:43). Death could not hold Lazarus. God's voice overwhelms

death. God's voice of resurrection is tied to Jesus' sacrifice. That is where the glory of God is anchored. That is where love and courage and selflessness are eternally anchored.

It was stunning! The shock, the elation, the wonder that surrounded that tomb, that day, that city! It swept through the area like a wildfire. He did what?! How long was Lazarus in the tomb?! It was that event that ushered Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The Messianic shouts were thunderous! Blessed is He! Hosanna to the Son of David! Hosanna to the King! Jesus' miracles don't come cheaply. His signs illuminate the cross. Lazarus was an icon of Jesus' present kingdom. The Lord's enemies wanted Lazarus dead because he was a walking testament of the Lord's authority. It was Jesus who would die. A blessed exchange took place there. A loving exchange took place there. No man had been there before – crucified for the sins of the world. No one had a love like that. No one had a heart like the lion of the tribe of Judah. Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Lazarus and Mary and Martha saw it – bank on it. The One who called me from my grave is dying on a cross. Why? He has the power to subdue death and yet He is hanging there in agony! Why?

For me. Lazarus saw the Lord give Himself completely to the cross, give Himself completely to God's punishment, give Himself completely into death. For me; Lazarus would come to know. Mere days after being called from his tomb, Lazarus saw Jesus bleed and die on the holy cross. For me. For my sins. For my life. That I might not die, but live. Surely the words which Jesus had told Martha ran through his mind: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." For me. This is how life comes to me. This is where His authority to call me from the tomb comes from. Lazarus! What kind of a man do you suppose he was after that? Is that the kind of man who would live in fear? Is that the kind of man who would desert you if you were in need? Is that the kind of man who would know, I mean really know, what Jesus meant when He said: "In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Love, courage, and selflessness are found in Christ. What He has done is real. We live in a real world with real difficulty and real decisions to make. I know, we have failed. I am far less than what I aspire to be. There are those who I have hurt and those I have failed to help. My sins are a blot in my eyes. Dry bones, brittle and useless, that is my sinful nature which clings to me. The hot air of my accuser dries up my hope and all I can see at those times is what is not. And then Christ's voice comes to me, through His Word His voice pierces my gloom and raises me from my despair, my self-interest, my petty problems. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." And a newfound spirit takes hold of me. His love bled and died for me. His strength is made perfect in weakness. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. He deigns to dwell in me, to use me to befriend those who struggle, to demonstrate His love to the forgotten, to nurse the sick in heart or in body. That is why we've been here before. Because Christ is always in His church and His church has stood tall in times just like these.

God has told the mighty men of old to be strong and courageous. That call to stand tall was not simply a cheerleader's mantra to a detached team on the field. God was with them. God is with us. He has already forgiven you all your sins, He has called you from the grave of unbelief and put you in His church. He has made His Spirit dwell in you and called you to love others as He

has first loved you. Be strong and courageous. He is risen from the dead and death is a defeated enemy, a buzzing bee with no stinger. Resurrection is the reality that envelops you, that is both in front and behind you, a reality that overwhelms sickness and death. Resurrection is here, for Christ is here. He has been here before. He reveals Himself as the Good Physician, the One who gives us the medicine of immortality in His body and blood. Love, courage, selflessness – they are here for Christ is here. He gives to us what is His. May Christ's name be hallowed in our lives. May His church be strong and courageous.