

Homily for the 5th Sunday in Lent

March 28-29, 2020

Readings: Ezekiel 37: 12-14; Romans 8: 8-11; John 11: 1-45

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It must be the case that something deep in our collective human psyche is terrified of the specter of dead human corpses inexplicably coming to life, pulling themselves out of their graves all ragged, ratty and half-decayed, with bulging, empty eyes, to roam around the countryside in the night looking for live human brains to devour. Really, who could have invented zombies except in a particularly gruesome nightmare?

And what explains the pervasiveness of the zombie in pop culture? Films ranging from “Night of the Living Dead” to “Pride and Prejudice and Zombies” channel this deep terror of monstrous not-dead creatures, not even human, intent on destroying innocent human victims.

In our Gospel reading for today, Lazarus was indeed dead. He had been dead for four days before Jesus and his friends arrived. Jesus orders the stone to be removed from the grave, and Martha objects, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days,” (or, in an old English translation, “He stinketh.”) And Jesus turns this understandable fear and revulsion into a faith statement: “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” Jesus prays audibly, then calls out “Lazarus, come out!”

Lazarus is called forth to life from out of the grave, but Lazarus is not a zombie. He was, of course, still wrapped with the burial shroud, and Jesus instructed those nearby to untie him.

We read this story a week before Palm Sunday and two weeks before Easter, the feast of Jesus’ resurrection—and yet Lazarus is not resurrected. Jesus raised Lazarus from death, but Lazarus’ death is not salvific for all of humanity. His death was a tragedy for his family and friends. Only the death of Jesus on the cross, imminent in both the Gospel of John and in our own celebration of the liturgical year, and his resurrection by the power of God, shattered the illusion

that death is the final, tragic end, and shows clearly life outside of time, beyond time—in eternity.

In our first reading, the prophet Ezekiel hears the word of God promising to bring his people out of their tombs, not as zombies but as living beings: “I will put my spirit within you and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil.” (NRSV) In our second reading Paul tells the new Christian community at Rome, “If the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, [the One] who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through [the] Spirit that dwells in you.”

Two main threads run through, not only these readings, but the readings for Lent: the questions, “Who *is* this Jesus of Nazareth, really?” and, “What is this power he commands that makes him far more than a dynamic teacher, or even an effective healer?”

Fear of facing our own mortality is entirely and understandably human. We might fear the possible physical pain. We might wish to avoid a loss of ability to care for ourselves leading to dependency upon others. We might fear facing unhealed brokenness in our lives and our relationships, of potential left untapped, of good work left undone. And, after a lifetime of confessing our sins and striving to live holy lives, we might fear the final judgment.

At the time of this writing, precautions against the spread of the coronavirus are progressively shutting down almost every aspect of people’s normal, taken-for-granted lives, from employment and mobility to social life and simple human touch. Some may live in denial but most live in insecurity and foreboding, the chaotic unknowing of the scope of the threat. The specter of an unthinkable high death toll lurks in those deep recesses of our consciousness, the space occupied in healthier times by fictional entertainment, tales of mayhem, staged fights and scary monsters.

So we make the wisest decisions we can, and search for genuine sources of hope. Some churches have announced that, when the severity of the crisis is past and public gatherings are permitted, the first Sunday will celebrate Easter Sunday, the

Resurrection of Christ from the dead, no matter which Sunday of the liturgical year it is.

We live in a new and different world. But it is now and always in the hands of a living God, Source of all life.