

From The Pastor

The mystery of life and death are more closely related than most of us ever dare to admit. Clinging to life and our ability to create a perceived sense of control and security blocks the ever-present reality of death. In the most perplexing of all contradictions, death and life are dependent upon one another. All living things come to death. Death is the transformation of all things into something new.

Death has many faces. There is of course, the final death when a person surrenders to the end of life in the body. For the believer, this dying becomes the promise of new and eternal life. Before this ultimate passing, there are many other kinds of death. We experience the death of friendships, loss of jobs, long held identities, the loss of good health, financial security, loss of homeland to war or calamity, or the loss of a beloved pet. We lose things through violence, crime, or theft. Cycles of life promise death and new life: summer to fall, winter to spring; parents give way to children, who give way to grandchildren. We die to a favorite way of doing something because a new way has been found. We die to ourselves in love for others giving up what we had been, while quite uncertain what lies ahead.

In the reality of all the large and small deaths that happen through life, we must learn to grieve and mourn. To not mourn and grieve our losses is to not ascend into the next place that life promises. To not mourn our losses is to blindly or unconsciously carry the residue and baggage of what had been, disallowing ourselves to realize and accept the new life that lies before us. This is not to imply that the thing lost is put away and forgotten. Mourning is the honest and painful acceptance and integration of the loss. Only through this process are we able to see and realize the new reality of life that is now offered. Jesus himself experienced this process in his own acceptance of death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

In the first reading, Ezekiel and his fellow citizens are suffering the loss of homeland, bearing the humiliation of refugees in a foreign land. Dead in spirit, the people have lost all hope. They have become bound up in the woes of this 'death' and need to be set free. They have gotten stuck in their sadness, which has disabled their ability to see and know God's presence. Ever faithful, God promises new life. 'O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them... I will put my spirit in you that you may live... Thus you shall know that I am the Lord'. Faith is restored, and their identity as God's people renewed. Unbound, they go forward with new life.

The story of Lazarus is a powerful story of death and new life. It clearly prepares the believer for the dying and rising of Jesus, and the power of love as its source. Love is evident throughout this story as it serves to be the only power that can accomplish the miracle that restores Lazarus to life.

John is careful to tell us of the friendship and love between Lazarus and Jesus, as well as Martha and Mary. Love is the source of new life and Jesus is its ultimate giver. To be loved by Jesus, to love Jesus, is to have new life. Like the blind man, but now in a deeper and more hidden way, Lazarus represents all of us. We are all friends of Jesus, loved by him, and called to share in the power of new life that only he can offer.

Like the previous stories of the woman at the well, and the blind man, this story is a call to faith. Those who come to faith will know and share in the Resurrection to new life. Such faith as this is found in Jesus alone. He alone is the one who can promise and fulfill the gift of eternal life. Cleverly, John presents the opportunity to both Martha and Mary to reveal and confirm this truth. "I am the Resurrection and the life", Jesus says. "Do you believe this?" This is the pinnacle question of John's gospel. Speaking for all believers of every generation, Martha affirms, "Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God..."

Now the scene is set. All has been put in place. The call is for faith and trust in Jesus, the one whom the Father sent. Lazarus is called forth. Crying in a loud voice, as if feeling every longing and desire of God to set the whole world free, Jesus says: "Lazarus come out!" Then, "Untie him, and set him free"

These words are for you and me just as immediately as they were for Lazarus. As followers of Jesus, we are not to be bound up in the fears, and pains, and deaths of life. In faith, we have been set free by the One who loves us. Love is the power that liberates and unbinds the pains, and fears of the past.

Where are you bound up, and what keeps you there? Maybe it is a life long fear, a bitter resentment, the loss of a loved one, a painful divorce, or a thousand other possibilities. Remember who you are as a child of God. You are not meant to be bound up. Read this story and let these words be spoken to you personally. Put your name in the place of Lazarus and hear Jesus tell you to 'Come out, and be set free'. This is your inheritance as a child of God. Claim it with joy and gratitude.

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