

Lent 5A (4/10/11 – *Passing from Death to Life in Christ*)

In the Name of JESUS. [Amen]

We are nearing the end of our *Lenten* journey. We are approaching our Savior's *Holy Week* and *Passion*. So is He. We journey **with** Him and walk in His light while it is still day ... before that awful night of betrayal and that horrible day on which it will be as midnight at midday. When Jesus suggests in our *Holy Gospel* that He and His disciples should journey to Judea – to Bethany, where Lazarus has died – the disciples are afraid. ***But Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?*** [JN 11.8] Jesus gives them a rather cryptic response: ***Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees by the light of this world.*** [11.9] The hour has been appointed by the Father ... the hour of the cruciform glorification of the Son. We cannot change the rising and setting of the sun. Neither could the disciples delay the time of the Cross by staying away from Jerusalem. Nor could Caiaphas, the Pharisees, and the Sanhedrin hasten it by their evil plotting to take His life. The Creator will serve His Creation ... Christ will ***give His life as a ransom for many*** [MT 20.28] – at the time agreed upon even before the foundations of the world were laid.

But that time is not yet. Our Savior will travel to Bethany and perform another miracle. It is a foretaste of what will come to pass with our Lord Himself in only a few weeks, when He rises from the dead the third day after His crucifixion. It is a foretaste of our own resurrection from death, when on the Last Day the Lord Who ***IS the Resurrection and the Life*** [JN 11.25] calls us forth from our graves to live before Him in righteousness and purity forever. Today we learn about ***Passing from Death to Life in Christ***.

Our Lord's dear friend Lazarus is sick. He is so sick that his sisters send a messenger to Jesus – presumably in hopes that Christ will come and heal him. But Jesus delays. ***This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*** [11.4] Note well: Jesus does **not** say that Lazarus will **not** die ... only that ***this sickness is NOT unto death***. And just as last week we heard the account of the man who was born blind so that the Son might be glorified in healing him ... so Lazarus is deathly ill in order that Christ might be glorified by raising him from the dead.

Jesus does not immediately go to Lazarus – and Mary and Martha. In fact, He waits ***two more days*** [11.6] before taking the 1-2 day journey to Bethany.

And even before Jesus gets on His way, He tells the disciples that Lazarus has died. ***Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him*** [11.11]. Elsewhere in Holy Scripture *falling asleep* is a euphemism for *dying*. So it is here. The disciples do not understand at first ... until Jesus tells them plainly: ***Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe*** [11.14-15].

Jesus could have prevented Lazarus' death – just as both Martha and Mary mention later when He arrives. ***Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died*** [11.21, 32]. But healing Lazarus would not have had the same salutary effect as will raising him from the dead. A little miracle creates a little faith. A great miracle engenders great faith – great faith in the One Who performs it ... great faith in His Words and promises. ***But even now I know that whatever You ask from God, God will give you*** [11.22]. Is Martha hinting that Jesus could raise Lazarus from death ... just as easily as He could have cured him of his illness **before** he died? That is, of course, true. He can.

Your brother will rise again. I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the Last Day [11.23-24]. Martha looks *for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come*. She knows and believes that **in CHRIST** there is life after death ... and that Lazarus will participate in that life. But ***this sickness is NOT unto death ... the Son of God will be glorified through it*** [11.4]. ***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. Do you believe this?*** [11.25] **That** is the question our Lord puts also to each of **us**. Do **you and I** believe not only that Jesus **can** resurrect and **give** life, but also that He is the eternal God Who **IS the Resurrection and the Life** – that **the Resurrection and the Life** reside in Him ... that there is no resurrection and no life **without** Him ... that **He** is the **only Resurrection and Life**? Do I believe that faith in Him means my eternal life, even though I die? And that living in Christ means that I will never **really** die – even though my body decay in the grave and raise a stench and my bones become as dry as those in Ezekiel's divine vision? Do I believe that already **NOW** I **have** eternal life ... and that the life I have **in CHRIST** will **never** end?

We must admit that this is difficult at the very least. Our eyes do not yet see beyond the grave. For now, death seems final. It is a thing greatly feared ... something to be avoided at all costs and as long as possible. Yet Christ would

here teach us that death is **not** the end ... but only a sleep as it were ... until He Himself shall return in great glory to raise up our flesh to life again to live with Him forever. Death is **not** the great menace the devil, the world, and our own fearful, sinful flesh would have us think it is. Satan knows well that if he can get us to look at death and consider it to be the great swallower of life – the end-all and the final word – then we will no longer believe our Lord to **BE *the Resurrection and the Life*** ... and we will have no hope for the life to come. St. Paul says: *If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied* [1COR 15.19]. For then our hope would have been only an illusion ... a false hope ... and a great deception.

But our Lord would teach us today that death is not such a powerful foe. Even death is no match for our Savior. And not just **any** death ... but a dead and in the grave four days and already decaying and stinking death. Sure, our Lord can raise a little girl who has **just** died [MK 5.41-42]. Her cells were still intact. That is just a matter of reviving her a little. But Lazarus? ***Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days***, Martha responds when Jesus commands: ***Take away the stone*** [11.39]. ***Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?*** our Lord answers doubting Martha. It is both a call to repentance and a herald to what He is about to do. How often does our own sinful doubt and unbelief place a great wall before us ... so that we would not see the blessings and the life God gives us?

Then Jesus prays to His Father ... lifting up His face and voice in prayer – not doubting but firmly believing that the heavenly Father hears Him and all God’s dear children who call upon Him in faith. ***Father, I thank You that You have heard Me*** [11.42]. Our Savior has already conversed with His Father on this matter. What He says now is for the sake of those standing around Him – **and for our sake** ... to engender and strengthen our faith in Him, our faith in God’s compassion and power, and our faith in the resurrection. ***When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”*** [11.43] ***And the man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth*** [44]. Here your Savior teaches you about ***Passing from Death to Life in Christ*** – since He **IS *the Resurrection and the Life*** ... the Son of God ... Who with His Father and the Holy Spirit has created and sustains all life. It is no more difficult for Christ to call forth Lazarus to life by His Word than it was to create the heavens and earth and all

that there is from nothing by that same Word. We might argue that it is easier – though that does not diminish the greatness of this miracle in any sense.

Our Lord Jesus Christ brings life where there was before only death and decay. By His powerful Word our Savior both commands and empowers the dead organism of Lazarus' rotting flesh to come to life, stand up, and ***come out*** from his grave. ***Behold, I will open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O My people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O My people. And I will put My Spirit within you and you shall live.*** [EZEK 37.12-14] In this Christ is glorified – that the Father has spoken of Him through the prophets ... and that in Him is fulfilled the Father's promise.

And what our dear Christ does here, He will do again. First, at His Crucifixion – when at midday the death of our Creator caused the sun to hide its light, and ***the tombs also were opened ... and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised*** [MT 27.52]. Then on ***Easter Sunday*** – when our Savior Himself rises from death and the grave, the stone is rolled away from His own tomb, and He appears to His disciples in His resurrected and glorified Body. And finally on the Last Day, when He returns in great glory and raises to life all who have died ... and brings to Himself in heaven all His saints.

But there is another sense in which He Who is ***the Resurrection and the Life*** works this miracle in His Church on an ongoing basis. For it is no less a miracle when our Savior wakes us from the deadly sleep of sin, causes us to repent, and restores us to true spiritual life in Him. As St. Paul says in COLOSSIANS: ***And you, who were dead in your trespasses ... God made alive together with CHRIST, having forgiven you all trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us ... This He set aside, nailing it to the cross*** [2.13-14]. And even more, through ***Holy Baptism*** the same Christ and Lord takes one who is completely dead in trespasses and sins and calls into being true faith – even though it be an infant. For just as here Christ speaks and commands and empowers the soul of Lazarus to respond, so in ***Holy Baptism*** Christ speaks through the Word He has commanded to be added to the water and creates a newborn being and empowers it to receive and believe in the blessings of the forgiveness, life, and salvation Christ gives through ***Baptism***.

Here then, in/by the Gospel, you are ***Passing from Death to Life in Christ***.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]