

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, 26 March 2023

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

Homily: Fr. Ken

A number of years ago, I taught theology classes at a graduate theology seminary in Tanzania.

I was told the story about a small group of people from a distant village who arrived at a mission hospital at night. They had come to retrieve the body of a relative who had died. They brought with them two bicycles and shovels with which they planned to transport his body to a nearby graveyard and bury him at dawn. They were, of course, filled with sadness and spoke quietly among themselves.

The religious sister on duty went to meet the people as they sat in the lobby, waiting to be escorted to the hospital's mortuary. But she simply told an attendant to wheel out the body for them.

Within a few minutes, the dead relative suddenly walked out into the lobby to greet his very surprised family, very much alive and sufficiently recovered from his illness to return home with them.

What happened was the hospital staff had confused his name with a person with a similar name who had died.

The relatives were completely transformed. They had traveled to the hospital filled with sadness, but left rejoicing because the one they had thought dead was alive and now travelling with them.

In the Gospel story, Martha and Mary nursed Lazarus through his final illness, death, and burial.

The two sisters knew that they had sent an explicit and accurate message to Jesus, telling him of the imminence of their brother's

death. They also knew that if Jesus and the apostles were to travel immediately, they would see Lazarus before he died.

When Jesus did finally show up four days late, Martha and Mary were not only mourning their brother's death, they were also bitterly hurt that Jesus made so little effort to be with his close friends when they needed him the most.

That is why Martha's words express both a reproach and a hope that Jesus could still do something.

Her belief in Jesus was still rudimentary. And, she was a pragmatist. Rather than expecting Jesus to bring Lazarus back to life, she crudely stated the obvious: Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days and there was a stench.

Jesus, however, asked the bystanders to roll back the stone at the entrance to the tomb. He then prayed and called out to Lazarus to come forth. At those words of Jesus, Lazarus walked out of the tomb, still wrapped in the burial cloths in which he had been entombed.

It took this action of Jesus, bringing the dead Lazarus back to life, for Martha to understand more fully that Jesus did possess the power over life and death that pertains only to God.

When Jesus restored life to Lazarus and returned him to his family, he also hinted at his own resurrection. Just as he changed the sorrow of Martha and Mary into joy, so Jesus' coming Resurrection would give new meaning and hope to life as we experience it.

In a similar way, although the Tanzanian family were Catholics and proclaimed in the Creed at each Sunday Mass that they believed in the Resurrection, they could not know or understand its astonishing reality.

It was when they experienced the deep sadness of knowing that they had lost someone they dearly loved, but then discovered

that same person was not dead but was alive, that they were able to connect their own experience to that of Jesus. Their experience was similar to that of Martha and Mary. Suddenly, the dead person was alive.

Their sorrow changed into a profound joy. They gained an appreciation of the value of a family member whom they had sometimes taken for granted. This meant a massive adjustment of their understanding, of their relationships, and their entire future, which would never again be the same.

The raising of Lazarus from death to life, tells us not to despair when we lose someone whom we love, for our loved one is still living, living with God in eternal life, in a way that each of us now can neither see nor fully imagine.

In this Gospel, then, Jesus gives us a foretaste of the impact that his own resurrection will make in our own lives.

We are not just living with a memory of someone who died. We are accompanying a living Jesus, day by day, whose constant love for us is alive and active.

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