

3.26.2023 Lent 5

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Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

“Christ lives in you”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The journey of Lent is the journey to Jesus’ cross and resurrection, focusing and renewing our faith upon the person of Jesus. Today’s gospel is part of that journey, and Jesus’ words to Martha are also words spoken to each of us: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”*

The words *“I am”* identify Jesus as the source of resurrection and life. In John’s gospel, Jesus uses the words *“I am”* a number of times describing himself as “the bread of life” (6:35), “the light of the world” (8:12), “the door” (10:7), “the Good Shepherd” (10:11, 14), “the way, the truth and the life” (14:6) and as “the true vine” (15:1). However, Jesus’ words, *“I am the resurrection and the life,”* must not be mistaken as symbolic metaphor; rather, Jesus is saying that everyone who believes in him – in their living and in their dying – already participates in the reality of his resurrection and life. These words contain profound meaning for humanity because we know that even though we live, we will also die. Jesus is announcing life in his resurrection, our present and our future in him. Jesus also gives us the means of grace, sacraments, to help us on our journey of faith. Jesus is alive in the water and the word of Holy Baptism; he is alive in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Jesus Christ lives so that he might live in you.

In Romans Paul writes, *“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies...through his Spirit that dwells in you.”* The living Spirit of Christ is transforming our mortal bodies as we participate in the present in Jesus’ resurrection life. Faith grasps this promise of life in Jesus as eternal life. To be in Christ is to know that though we will die, we are also alive through his Spirit which is giving resurrection life to our mortal bodies.

As human beings we are aware of our mortality. Yet we live in a world that does two things: the world tries to tell us that we can prolong our life by “staying young,” so we worship at the altar of youth and in doing so, we do not allow ourselves to grow into maturity as human beings. Jesus is very real with us, telling us that we will die and that faith in him is the way to truth about life. Second, the world tells us daily that we can avoid death by simply not talking about it. Jesus came into this world to talk about dying so that we might learn how to live.

Therefore, when Paul says that *“the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead [is the] Spirit that*

*dwells in you,*” Paul is saying that the life Jesus offers is *beyond* life and death. By over-sentimentalizing the humanity of Jesus, we forget that the Jesus of Nazareth is also the Word through whom all things were made. He is life beyond human life and death. His life is the breath of creation, the creative Word bringing into being all that has life. The Lenten journey to the cross and resurrection is the journey to the cradle of creation so that we might daily be recreated through his Spirit dwelling in us.

Yet Martha and Mary’s very human question is also our question: “*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*” Death is a boundary whose finality we are powerless against. This is why Jesus delayed in going to Lazarus. Jesus waited until the grave had claimed Lazarus. Jesus delayed in order to cause faith in Martha, Mary, Lazarus and all who mourn. The life that Jesus gives transforms our grief and suffering into life-giving faith.

Jesus told Martha, “*Your brother will rise again,*” and she replied to him, “*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*” Martha did not yet believe. Her reply was simply “knowledge” about the resurrection on “*the last day.*” It was not yet faith in the living presence of Jesus as resurrection and life dwelling in her. Jesus delayed his arrival so that he could, with great power, point to himself as “*the resurrection and the life.*” Jesus is the reality of resurrection beyond human knowledge. Faith in him is the only way of knowing his resurrection life.

This is why Ezekiel’s words are so powerful; they cause us to remember that the source of all life is the Spirit and breath of God. “*Thus says the Lord your God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.*” Jesus, the resurrection and the life, is the eternal Word always breathing life into humanity. The life that Jesus gives exists beyond human life and death, because he is the ground and the goal of all existence. The promise of Ezekiel’s words, “*I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live,*” are revealed in Jesus. The one who went to Lazarus’s tomb is the incarnate Word of God who visits every human grave.

The greatest expression of Jesus’ humanity recorded in the gospels is Jesus overcome by human distress and grief. In Jesus’ sharing the grief of Lazarus’s family and friends, we can also see Jesus present in and sharing the grief of all whose loved ones have gone to the grave. Jesus’ presence at the tomb is not simply a foreshadowing of his own death, Jesus reveals the living Word creating life out of death and giving light in the darkness at those places we bury our loved ones.

Jesus ordered them to take away the stone, saying, “*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*” The glory of God Jesus speaks of is resurrection and life. To reveal this, Jesus cried with a loud voice, “*Lazarus, come out!*” Lazarus’s tomb is not the empty tomb of Easter morning, rather it represents Ezekiel’s promise that God will open every grave,

transforming every human death with Christ's Spirit of resurrection and life.

Finally, Jesus' words, "*Unbind him, and let him go,*" speak of absolute freedom and liberation from the fear of death and the grave. In Jesus standing before the threshold of death, human grief and pain are given the hope of light in the darkness. Jesus is the door of the sheep, opening death to life-giving power. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who visits every grave offering resurrection and life.

So that we might know this life, Paul encourages us *to set our mind* on the Spirit of Christ who is life and peace. Christ lives in you so that through your life others might know the freedom that overcomes all fear.

Yet rather than liberating others from their fears and distress, our world often walls people off from community into tombs of death because of the color of their skin, their ethnicity, gender or identity. Jesus visits us in our moments of death and dying, unbinding us from the threshold of death. Jesus has given you life in his resurrection so that you might unbind others from the tombs this world places them into. Jesus gives us his resurrection life today, not just an abstract "future eternal life" – Jesus unbinds us, freeing us to live for others.

Resurrection life with Christ is about unbinding and freeing others so that our neighbor might also know Jesus' resurrection and life.

Christ lives in you, freeing you from death, so that you might unbind others. Christ lives in you, giving you power to unbind and free all who live in the shadow of death.

Christ lives in you, so that through you, others might also know life in him. Amen.