

“Conversations at the tomb”

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

Tonight we conclude this year’s Lenten Midweek series, titled, “Holy Conversations with Jesus,” This Lent has been an opportunity to hear Jesus in conversation, not only with characters in the Bible, but also with us in our lives.

The Bible is filled with people in conversation with God. For example, Paul, encourages us to be in conversation with God, in the well-known words, “*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:12-13). The words, *fear and trembling*, mean that rather than being afraid of God, we are to actively live out our faith with a reverent trust in God. In English we can struggle with the word “fear” because we have only one predominant meaning, which means “to be afraid of”; yet this phrase, “fear and trembling,” really means living with an abiding reverence for God who is at work in all our conversations during our lifetime.

I want to draw upon this phrase, *fear and trembling*, because it reminds me that as we stand before the reality of death and our own mortality, we also, with trembling hands and voices, live out the promise of Christ’s resurrection. Jesus meets us in all our trembling questions and moments of challenge, with the promise of life. Jesus meets us in our trembling moments of wilderness, in the dread of night, and in community gathering places by giving us life-giving water that heals our every ill.

Tonight, Jesus meets us at the one place where we express our deepest and most ultimate questions. It is a place where we have no control or power at all – Jesus meets us in our places of death and dying. Tombs and graves have always been located literally on the periphery of human life and community. Like keeping death at arm’s length, we know that the cemetery is there, yet we also separate places of burial from places of daily life. From antiquity onward, cemeteries, though sacred, have been a boundary, setting death at a limit apart from the community. Amid our modern city development and urban sprawl, cemeteries that were once on the outskirts of town, can now feel much closer to residential areas, as cities continue to spread outward in an organic way – helping us remember that death is also part of life.

This observation is demonstrated as Jesus returns to Bethany, and not yet near the village, was met by Martha and then by Mary. The tomb of their brother was located on the outskirts of the village, and Jesus had to ask Mary and Martha to lead him to the tomb, saying, “*Where have you laid him?*” They said to him, “*Lord, come and see.*”

Just as the tomb is a reality, occupying a physical place, “fear and trembling” also occupy a place in the emotional topography of this story. Profound grief and weeping are central to the story because they are an important part of human life everywhere in the world. In tonight’s story, friends, family, and Jesus himself, all wept at the death of a beloved friend and brother. Like our own moments of grief, we also see others around the world grieving in places of war and disaster because these emotions are the price we pay for loving others. Notice that in Jesus, God also grieves and weeps with all who suffer and mourn at tombs and graves.

When Jesus arrives at the tomb of Lazarus, he is described as “greatly disturbed,” which I take as a description of “fear and trembling.” Jesus is not scared; rather, as he grieves, Jesus also experiences the awe of God’s power. Looking upward, Jesus says, “*Father, I thank you for having heard me,*” showing us that he stands, not in fear, but like us in reverence and awe before the Father – in awe of the Father’s saving power. Jesus models how to pray as we stand before death, always knowing that the Father hears our prayers. Jesus models faith and trust in the face of death and dying.

Such faith in God is a living power. In other words, as Jesus struggles with grief and death, he actively shows us his trust in God at work through him for others.

Recently, I reread a small book by Bertrand Russell titled, “*What I Believe.*” Published in 1925, this book may seem like an unusual book to read during Lent, but my faith is always seeking understanding, always in dialogue with my intellect as I seek to understand the world.

Bertrand Russell was certainly one of the great philosophers of the 20th century – he was believer, not in God, but in reason and science, and this little book outlines what he believed in place of God. I must admit that I have soft spot in my heart and in my mind for Bertrand Russell because I first encountered him as a teen in high school reading *A History of Western Philosophy*, which was a textbook in a year-long philosophy course at my Jesuit high school. This course covered the history of western philosophy from Greek Presocratic philosophers to the existentialism of the postwar period.

I mention this because, though I disagree with Bertrand Russell on many things, as a modern person, my intellect and reason are always in dialogue with my faith – as I stand before my own mortality and as I walk with others in moments of death and grief. The holy conversation of faith and reason has been an important part of my life since I was a child, as I learned to think, to pray, and to listen to God. This is the faith Jesus encourages in this story.

Tonight we come to the end of our Lenten series, and I hope that you go away in a renewed sense of conversation with God in your life. God has given us faith and reason so that we might converse with God who is at work in us, empowering us to be in conversation with

others. Standing before the mystery of life, prayer is an ongoing conversation with God, always meeting and empowering us to be with others in moments of death and dying.

In closing tonight, I find it fascinating that Lazarus says not one word in this gospel story, yet responds to Jesus' words of life, "*Lazarus, come out!*" Lazarus' non-verbal response reveals that he came out of the tomb not by his own power but by God's power alive in him – giving him new life.

It is my great hope that in death, God will call each of us, raise each of us, wake us to new life, where, like Lazarus, we know will his voice and respond because he already lives in us. Faith begins where my intellect and reason so often seem puny and powerless, and yet faith emboldens my mind to envision and to work for the things of God in this often very broken world.

Jesus calls you in your *fear and trembling* before death to live in the presence of God every day. May you listen for Jesus. May you converse with him each day, and may you hear him in moments of death and dying.

Jesus Christ is with you. There is no place you where he will not find you to raise you up. Like Lazarus, he comes to unbind you from death, freeing you live for others. Amen.