



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 26, 2023
EZEKIEL 37:1-14; PSALM 130; ROMANS 8:6-11; JOHN 11:1-45

THE PATH OF PASSION



These bones will live, I tell you!

Easter won't be long in coming now, but to get there we must pass through the dark

valley of the shadow of death. It's a hard road, this Lenten journey, that takes us to betrayal and violence and untimely death and stomach-turning grief.

Our flesh will ache with parched fear; our bones will bend under the wracked weight. In time, our bereaved hearts will break and be healed in Lazarine hope that resurrection can be known, that Jesus can be believed, that God is the agent of miraculous power that comes in the present moment.

Some may choose to elide their Lenten journey from here, forgoing Holy Week, skipping straight to Easter and its bright pastels of joy and delight, but make no mistake, true Easter colors come fully to life only when the palette is mixed with the tears of grief and loss. This is the paradox of the Paschal Mystery.

To get there we must pass through the graveyard, disorienting as it is. Jesus showed us the way when he returned to Bethany and his beloved friend. He invites us to persist in the journey. We are close now, he says, so come with me.

Until fifty years ago, this Fifth Sunday in Lent was known as Passion Sunday—the launch into a fortnight trudge through the passion of Christ. For reasons not entirely clear to me, the western Church collapsed this Passion Sunday into Palm Sunday, which next week will strive once more to hold it all—the triumphal entry, the agonizing conspiracy, the passion of Christ on the cross, the hewn

tomb of grief where hope is buried. Few liturgies have as much packed in; few liturgies have us move as much.

We would do well to practice the movement today, as Jesus invites us to go with him. It's no small thing that the word "passion" packs in deep desire, intimate knowing, and the pain of suffering and grief, all together in a meaning that only makes real sense in the context of love. We can trace the path of passion from here, today.

Jesus begins in the wilderness, across the Jordan River, a day's walk from his friend's home. He receives word Lazarus is ill but is not rushed. He stays two more days. And then a day's walk in the direction of his own death in Jerusalem. Bethany lies two miles east; the Mount of Olives, Gethsemane and Golgotha lie on the path from Bethany to Jerusalem, and Jesus knows it all too well, but says let us go anyway.

In Jesus' day it was believed the soul lingered by the body for three days before departing for good. Four days dead means really dead. A stench is all to arise from Lazarus decaying sinews not yet dried but well on their way.

By tradition, the family of the deceased remained in the home; visitors would come to them. But Martha goes to Jesus, I think rather courageously, and has a tender

conversation with Jesus, who brings the hope of resurrection, for Lazarus, and Martha, and you and me, into the present. Not “I will be resurrection and life,” but “I am”—right here, right now—for anyone willing to believe it to be true. It is not a safe story, but Martha takes it to her sister Mary, and says “Jesus is calling for you.” The words are intended to light on our ears as well.

Mary leaps from her chair; the people around her follow in amazement. They think she is running to the tomb, hysterical with grief. But she is running to see Jesus, and we can imagine her tears of grief and hope mingling on her wet face as she fell to her knees before him. Just days later, she would repeat this posture to anoint his feet with nard and wipe them with her hair. There is an intimate knowing between Jesus and Mary to which we are privy, and it is beautiful.

Jesus arrives at the tomb and weeps for Lazarus, perhaps for himself, and for all of us, bound by this mortal reality of grief and loss. The passion begins here with a glimpse into Easter joy. We need not ever lose sight of that, if we are to find our way.

Soon enough Jesus will make his way to the Mount of Olives, with palms of glory, laud and honor laid before him.

Two weeks ago, thirty of us made that same trek, with the dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the horizon, across the Kidron Valley, but to get there, we walked the steep descent through the graveyards that hold three thousand years’ worth of bodily remains. Gethsemane lies at the foot of the mountain, where we lingered amidst thousand year old olive trees as the late afternoon sun cast shadows into the valley—this valley of the shadow of death through which we all must pass.

But Jesus was there, is there, will be there, for any who believe, weeping for us, with us, while also setting his face toward Jerusalem, and his own death.

“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Let us also sew our tears of grief and hope into the story that has a dead man walking today, and has Jesus telling those who have gathered, Unbind him and let him go. There is hope even in the graveyard.

John 11:1-45 *[Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in*

the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.]

ⁱ Resurrection of Lazarus. Private coll., Athens. 12-13 c.
Воскрешение Лазаря.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lazarus_of_Bethany#/media/File:Lazarus_Athens.JPG