

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan  
March 29, 2020  
Lent 5th Sunday of Year A John 11:1-45

In today's Gospel there is a sense of despair, disappointment, even blame (Martha to Jesus, "If you had been here my brother would not have died.") that permeates the whole text. No doubt it resonates with how many of us feel today: the dread of contracting the coronavirus, anxiety about the future, and sadness surrounding the death of so many innocent people. A tickle in the throat, an unfamiliar ache in the back, a slight headache, all approach with an aspect of threat they did not possess before. Death is a reality. Yet, banishing the grief that has overtaken Martha and Mary, Jesus calls loudly, "Lazarus, come out." And, to the amazement of the crowd, Lazarus, who had been dead for four days already, is returned safe and sound to his family. It is Jesus saying to the crowd, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he does will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die." This announcement, of course, is the focal point of the story. In fact, it is the focal point, indeed, the pivot, the hinge of John's whole gospel, as it is located in the very middle, chapter 11 out of 22 chapters. All that leads up to this point and all that follows serves to reveal who Jesus is and what He offers, a promise of "eternal life." The question, then, is what will we focus on today. Will it be on the specter of death, lurking all around us, or will it be on the presence of the risen Jesus abiding among and within us?

What precisely is this "eternal life" of which Jesus speaks. Most likely we think of it as "time" that goes on and on and on forever. But why are we to presume that our notions of space and time should exist in a realm beyond the grave? "Eternal life" is a poor translation for what might be better expressed as "the life to come," i.e., when the life that belongs uniquely to God is shared with all humanity. So, some of the great mystics of the church speak of it as the "Eternal Now." "Eternal life" is the promise of a life beyond the grave—a promise that nothing, not even the boundary of death, can separate us from the love of God. In St. John's Gospel it is equally clear that this "life" is not something we have to wait until death to find out about, but something we can experience to some degree even now. It is the capacity to hear the voice of the One whom God has sent, and to respond to His voice by living in the manner He has shown us, as we make His way of life our own, that we begin to have a taste of that life, in what St. Paul speaks of as "the peace that surpasses all understanding (Phil. 4:7). "Eternal life" exists as a continuum, or in the words of St. Catherine of Siena, "All the way to heaven is heaven."

Today's Gospel story is found just before the events that lead up to Jesus'

crucifixion. It takes place in the town of Bethany, only two miles from Jerusalem. Jesus was certainly aware that by leaving the relative safety of Galilee to come down to raise Lazarus from the dead, He is putting His own life in jeopardy. The news of what He has done will certainly spread to Jerusalem, where the chief priests of the Temple who already perceive Jesus as a dangerous nuisance will now be prompted to act, to remove Him forever as a threat to their vested interests. In John 15:13, we read, "No greater love has one than this, to lay down his life for his friends." Jesus, in coming down to Bethany, will be laying down His life for His friend, but also for all humanity by His death on the cross.

We have been asked to lay down just a portion of our lives--our freedom, our autonomy--by remaining indoors in order to prevent the spread of the virus. We see doctors, nurses, hospital workers risking their lives, out of devotion to the patients in their care--certainly not for the low salary many of them earn. Blaise Pascal wrote, "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." He meant that we dread boredom and instead choose aimless distraction. In these moments of relative solitude that are forced upon us, let us use them wisely—not to focus on our own "worst case scenario," but on the abiding, empowering, consoling presence of the risen Jesus, always with us.