5th Sunday of Lent
Cycle A, 3.29.20
Ezekiel 37:12-14/Romans 8:8-11/John 11:1-45

NOT HAND-IN-HAND.....
BUT HEART-IN-HEART

There are several instances in the gospels where Jesus practiced “social distancing.” It wasn’t imposed upon him, like the Contra Costa County ordinance we received two weeks ago mandating that we “shelter in place.” It seems from the Scriptures that, for Jesus, it was freely chosen. He was getting away from crowds who were demanding his time and attention, his healing and his teaching. (And sending away the crowds, Jesus got into the boat...Mt 15:39) At other times he was getting away from his own followers, that merry band of misfits who never “got it,” never seemed to quite understand Jesus – who he was, what he was all about. (Have I been with you all this time, and still you don’t know me, Philip? Jn 14:9).

One place of refuge for Jesus was the home of his dear friends – Martha, Mary and Lazarus. In their company, his teaching and attention, his time and affection weren’t demanded of him. He freely offered them because he was in the home of an intimate few who understood him and who recognized him for who he was – the Messiah. In our gospel passage, Martha openly declares: I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God...” Even the disciples weren’t as clear and convinced about Jesus. The depth of the relationship of Jesus to these three villagers of Bethany is obvious from our gospel. When approaching his friend’s tomb the narrator says succinctly yet powerfully: And Jesus wept. The neighbors and townsfolk could sense Jesus’ deep affection for Lazarus. They said: See how he loved him.

Throughout his ministry Jesus encountered so many people – all looking for something, all needing something, all demanding something. Each with a different kind of faith – those who were incredulous, those who were not fully convinced, those whose faith was there but inadequate, those who wanted to believe but still wrestled with so many doubts, those who needed proof in order to believe, those who found delight in the “something new” that Jesus had done for them, those for whom faith didn’t matter because nothing seemed to change in their lives. Some came to Jesus on the grounds that it could do no harm and might make them feel better. Others came to him aware that, despite external appearances, their lives were a mess, perhaps too much of a mess to have hope. There were those who went back and forth, sincerely searching and...
eagerly anticipating something great, Someone wonderful.

To all of them – to all of us – Jesus extends the invitation: *Drink from the spring of life-giving water! Open your eyes and look around! Come out of that tomb into the light of day, into Life – into the Life of the Spirit!* No matter what motivates your faith or what challenges it, we are together in this current crisis. Faith is our mainstay and the rock on which we must stand. So all the characters we encounter in the gospels are reflections of ourselves. Each of us at a different stage of life, a different phase of our relationship with God, a different level of belonging. The community of disciples includes all of us as the gospels demonstrate. They are a mirror of our own faith and understanding. So we ask God to help us be faithful disciples.

During this time of our physical distance from the larger community of parish, school, social groups, gym buddies, prayer group and hiking partners, we long for some connection – for that tenderness and intimacy that Jesus experienced in the companionship of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. I hope that each day you’ll invite the Lord into your heart and home, whether you live alone or with your family. Enjoy his company, his friendship and be in communion with the One who is our health and our salvation – our Resurrection and our Life.

I’ve always been inspired by Maya Angelou, the great African-American poet, author and civil rights leader. She was a woman of deep faith, but also brutal honesty. In her book of essays: *Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, she wrote:

> My faith is tested many times every day, and more times than I’d like to confess, I’m unable to keep the banner of faith aloft. If a promise is not kept, or if a secret is betrayed, or if I experience long-lasting pain, I begin to doubt God and God’s love. I fall so miserably into the chasm of disbelief that I cry out in despair. Then the Spirit lifts me up again, and once more I am secured in faith. I don’t know how that happens, save when I cry out earnestly I am answered immediately and am returned to faithfulness. Then the Spirit lifts me up again, and once more I am secured in faith. I am once again filled with Spirit and firmly planted on solid ground.

If we’re struggling with faith and doubting whether we should believe, let’s ask God to overcome our obstacles. If we believe, let’s ask God to strengthen our faith so that we can be a witness and support to others, especially as faith is being tested by the current pandemic. And as we face that final specter of death, which we all must someday, may God grant us the grace to see that we already possess life in God – a life that death cannot touch.
May that Holy Spirit lift you and me up as we face these challenging times together – if not hand-in-hand, then heart-in-heart.

Fr. John Kasper, OSFS