

Seeing Through Death

5th Sunday in Lent (Year A)

March 29, 2020

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Today's homily is depressing, yet ultimately liberating. It has to do with death. At this moment in history, people all over the world are thinking about death. Even if dying is an extremely small possibility for most of us, knowing that the coronavirus is no longer contained leads us in this direction. As we stay home and self-quarantine, we ask ourselves, 'what if we get it; what if we need to be hospitalized; what if a loved one gets it; what if we die?'

The characters in today's Gospel had to face death, the death of Lazarus. His sisters, Martha and Mary, were obviously distraught about their brother's death. Many Jews had come to offer them comfort and Jesus himself, upon his arrival, shared in their grief as he wept. Death certainly is an unpleasant experience that brings with it a lot of emotion. In the midst of it all, however, Jesus taught his disciples to see through it. Death does not have the last word. As we heard, at Jesus' words, 'Lazarus come out,' the dead man came out of the tomb alive!

As a modern society, we have had the luxury of putting death off. Many previous generations did not live with that luxury. In this sense, advances in medicine and technology have been a great blessing to us. The down side, however, is that we don't know how to deal with death very well anymore. We aren't practiced in it. Since we wait to deal with it until the last possible moment, it fills us with fear and anxiety. We treat it as if it were something unacceptable, inappropriate, or dirty.

In the Christian tradition, death is revered as one of our greatest teachers. After all, our central Christian symbol is a cross. For us, death is not a one-time final reality that we will eventually have to deal with someday in a panic, but it is

an ongoing reality that we face every day in little ways. Any time something doesn't go our way or we have to suffer, we die a little to ourselves. The more we calmly allow this to happen to us, the more we come to realize that there is something on the other side of death. Death is not the last word. We start to see through death to something greater. We start to see new life. We start to experience resurrection.

Death is not meant to cause panic, but to gradually teach us that there is something greater on the other side of it.

As we move ahead with great uncertainty, let us be certain of one thing. As the Franciscan priest and author Fr. Richard Rohr says, 'you got to die before you die.'