

**29 March 2020**

**Fifth Sunday of Lent**

*John 11:1-45*

I've been fascinated with the life of Muhammad Ali, the great boxer, for some time now. The part of his life that this Gospel calls to mind was his first title fight against Sonny Liston in 1964. Liston was a brute of a man, with biceps at least twice the size of Ali's. But Ali was obsessed with getting to fight Liston for the heavyweight championship of the world. With his wit and articulate mouth, Ali forged a publicity campaign that included a lot of taunting of Liston, calling him often a "big ugly bear." With a corps of reporters accompanying him, he drove to Denver to Liston's home and that three o'clock in the morning starting shouting "Come of there now; I'm gonna whip you, you big ugly bear." Eventually he got his match and as the fight began Liston was an 8 to 1 favorite. Ali won, by technical knockout at the start of the seventh round.

I thought of this story after doing a little investigating about a peculiar word in today's Gospel story. Did you notice how the author described Jesus' emotional state when he approached a weeping Mary and when he approached the sealed tomb? Our translation said he was "perturbed." Strange word. I think of it as being annoyed. Was Jesus annoyed by Mary's tears, irritated by the tomb? So, I looked at my bible notes and did a little googling. Turns out that the Greek word translated as "perturbed" is *enibrimesato*, literally meaning "He snorted in spirit." The word is used in classical Greek to describe a war horse as it prepares to charge an enemy. **Like Muhammad Ali was obsessed with fighting Sonny Liston, just so Jesus was obsessed with confronting death itself.** He deliberately delayed his arrival in Bethany so it wouldn't be just another healing, but a face-off with death itself.

I looked for images of the Raising of Lazarus in art, and the one that struck me most was by Rembrandt. Jesus is standing strong, mouth open, forehead intensely creased, and his hand held high above his head. "Lazarus, come out!" It is nothing other than a war cry. His war against death.

I am usually drawn to images of the gentle Jesus who played with children, considered himself our Good Shepherd, and who preached Blessed are the merciful, love your enemies, and don't worry about your life because God will provide. And yet today's Gospel account draws me into appreciating a warrior Jesus. He doesn't whisper, "Lazarus, come out," he screams it.

I wondered, then, since he was so full of adrenaline and ready for this epic battle, how is it that when he encountered Mary weeping in grief for her brother that Jesus also wept. (John 11:35, the shortest verse in the Bible, "and Jesus wept."). Might he not have said, "Mary, don't cry, just wait and see what I'm gonna do!" But no, he loves her, he sees her suffering, and he cries with her. He hates not only death but what death does to survivors, the hole in our hearts that grief is. This moment of shared pain motivates him all the more to go and confront and defeat death.

Yesterday I rode my bicycle across town and stopped into the cemetery on the east hill. The first tombstone I noticed was large and had the words carved around its sides, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believeth in me, though he die, will live. Whoever believeth in me will never die." And I thought of the millions of people, so many right in our city who have lost jobs, who worry about keeping their homes, who don't have high speed internet for their children to keep up in school or to communicate with the world, who grieve the death of loved ones. And I thought, Jesus cries with them, too, cries with us, even as he proclaims with confidence, "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

And I thought of the question Jesus asked Mary's sister Martha, "Do you believe this?" And I thought of me and you and what it would mean if more and more of us really did, deep in our hearts.

We would be so less fearful. We would value nothing more than our communion with Jesus, Lord of life and death and risen savior. Paul's words from our second reading would make perfect sense: "If the spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also." We would be free to love one another extravagantly.

When Muhammad Ali won that title fight against Sonny Liston, he proclaimed to the world, "I am the Greatest. I shook up the world. I shook up the world!" **Jesus is not a self-promoter like that. He wouldn't say those kinds of words about himself. But we can. And we can let the truth of what he does claim, that he is the Resurrection and the Life, fill every corner of our being with light, hope, and love.**