

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A  
John 11: 17-45  
Deacon Patty Minx

## *The Question Lazarus Raises*

Maintaining hope can be difficult these days. Yet, you and I are addicted to hope because, when you stop and think about it, hope signifies one thing for us; the continuance of self. We know in our hearts that life as we know it is not forever, that everything must pass, and yet it is easier for us to believe in a resuscitation rather than a resurrection. Our hope is that we will be restored to life as we have had before. We want to bypass the graveyard and have Easter right now. We would like to avoid Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday altogether. Maybe it is because we don't see the value of grieving; for if we allow ourselves to be caught in grief then we are giving up hope.

The gospel for today has prompted me to look at hope as being one of our addictions. It is a way to clinging unto our lives as we know them. I find hope to be confusing and ambiguous. What will happen if I do not cling to hope? Am I a quitter? What should I be hoping for? These are the questions that Lazarus raised for me in my preparation to preach today.

One of the reasons I got involved in working with the dying was due to my encounter with a man named Karl about 12 years ago. Because of Karl I wanted to be a messenger of hope to those who were grieving and in pain. When I was serving as hospice chaplain – and I have to say it was not a comfortable position to be in – I knew the outcome was going to be death. I rejoiced with the one dying, knowing he or she would be set free from all that held down love, but this person's family or friends would be left behind to deal with their grief and inadequacy surrounding this person's absence from their lives. I know from experience that human hope does run out, but many of us don't want to embrace such a concept. As a result, the pain and suffering stretches on and on. Few of us want to deal with the possibility that there is no hope. When you stop and think about it, hope comes from our thinking. Hope is entirely of our own creation, full of emotion and the neediness not to lose ourselves.

Karl had been battling leukemia for 12 years. He was in and out of remission. Each remission was a hope-filled time. Karl and his family were unique in that there was little dysfunction within that unit because Karl made sure that Christ was the center of their lives. Karl and his wife prayed as a couple every morning before the day began. They lived a life that reflected simplicity and a total reliance on God's love. They shared their marriage with other engaged couples. They simply weren't afraid to share their faith with those seeking God. And like any parent, they wanted what was wholesome and good for their son. Despite their will being in alignment with God's will, the disease finally overtook Karl's hope to live. The blood transfusions to bring his platelets up were no longer doing the job. Still, Linda, his wife, was not going to give up and she really pushed Karl to keep on with the treatment. One day Karl shared with me, from his hospital bed, that he was ready to go home to the Father, to be with Jesus, but what held him back was his family. They simply would not listen when he told them it was time to go. They did not realize that their hope in staying together was causing Karl a great deal of pain. He had no one to tell this to until that day I came to see him. My heart ached for him. I ached because no one would listen to him. Karl

also understood why Linda and his son was clinging to hope. Karl cried as he told me: “As much I prefer the love of Christ, it is still very hard for me to say good-bye to Linda and Brian. I will never get to see my son graduate, get a job, marry.” I could see that Karl was deeply torn by his love for God and his love for his family. Karl knew God was not going to come and rescue him from this dilemma. He would have to see it through. With time and a little more patience, Karl was able to go home to Father.

We are driven to do anything to gain security, recognition and purpose. And when we don't get what we want we cling to the idea that God will come to our rescue. We are afraid to embrace hopelessness because we view it as admitting failure, and who wants to be known as a failure. The need to survive, to be right, to be in charge are so deep within us. Hope, at times, is filled with statements like “If I do such and such then this will surely happen.” We want to resuscitate what was, rather than allow for resurrection to happen. The Egyptians mummified their dead, soaking dead bodies in formaldehyde in order to keep them intact. As an image, this is the antithesis of what happen during the Holy Week of our Lord. The Christian way is let go, to renounce ourselves, let nature take its course, to trust that God who gave us life in the first place will now give it in an even deeper way. One of the spiritual writers I often look to when life is falling part wrote: “The real thing that we renounce is the tenacious hope that we could be saved from being who we are.” She went on to write: “If we are willing to give up hope that insecurity and pain can be exterminated then we can have the courage to relax with the groundlessness of our situation.”

When someone dies the room gets very quiet and still. And for some of us that can be very disconcerting, because there is nothing more to be done. The feeling of helplessness overcomes us and the hope of recovery is gone. In the time of death, life is questioned. As Ezekiel expressed in today's first reading: “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone, we are cut off.” Sometimes there is so much junk or grief or fear weighing us down that we cannot seem to believe there is a God. But then in a valley of dry bones God does His work. He restores life. He comes into the valley and wraps up the dry old bones with skin and breathes fresh moist air on them again and makes them live again.

When we are in the valley of dry bones we cannot even imagine Resurrection. Most of the time all we are able to do is sit with Ezekiel in death valley, or lie with Lazarus in the tomb. We don't even want to come out of the tomb. It is too hard to roll back the stone. Haven't you ever notice that our suffering begins to dissolve when we can question the belief or the hope that there is anywhere to hide.

When hope becomes confused, questioning occurs. Questioning God might sound sacrilegious, but there is plenty of biblical precedent for it. Jacob argues with God about his personal catastrophe. The Psalmists complain about the silence of God. God is questioned in the Lazarus event: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Could he not have prevented all this horrible pain and heartache we see in front of us? Jesus does not answer their question. The tragic deaths of the children in the Tsunami left some of us with

the question “How could God allow this?” Whenever someone has asked me this at the death of their loved one, I could only stand with them in silence.

Jesus simply weeps with Mary and Martha. He is deeply moved by their grief for their dead brother. Jesus reveals in this action that God does exist, but not in a remote and aloof position. God is involved in the situation as a tender God, who cries with us. Out of the grief comes action: the raising of Lazarus. Jesus’ slow response to the death of His friend reveals that God doesn’t act exactly when, where and how we would like. Christian maturity involves learning to simply wait for the spring to unfold. We need to give up the hope that pain and insecurity can be exterminated in this lifetime.

In doing so, we can, like Jesus, wrap ourselves with the courage to face our fears and walk towards Good Friday. Yes, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead but that did not prevent Lazarus from dying again. Jesus’ action was laying the groundwork for His own death and resurrection. Jesus never did away with death. He took it upon Himself and out of His own corporation with death unfolded the joy of Easter.

What the dying have taught me is that death and hopelessness provide the proper motivation for living an insightful and compassionate life. Yet, you and I are constantly trying to deny what is a natural occurrence. We want to deny death as a part of living. Once we recognize this then there is a new lease on life. The beauty of Karl’s death was in the way he had lived, and it was felt by everyone at his funeral. There was a feeling of joy and peace.

As Christians we recognize terminal death as the end of life and the end of all possibilities. At the same time, as Christians we recognize there is a paschal death, which ends one way of living and opens us to receive a deeper and richer form of life. The new life that Lazarus received was not the resurrected life but, a resuscitated life. He was restored to his former life and health. He gets his old life back, but with the stipulation he’ll die again. Jesus did not get his old life back. He received a new life; a richer life because he allowed it to unfold in accordance with God’s Will.

The only road that leads to Easter morning goes through calvary and a graveyard. So I hope that as Holy Week arrives on Palm Sunday, we take up the task of doing our grief-work by joining Jesus on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Times for these services are in the bulletin. If all of us here accept this invitation I can promise you Easter morn at St. Luke’s will be more than just another ordinary Sunday. That’s my hope for us.