

Raising the Dead

I believe it was Ben Franklin who said that there were only two sure things in life, death and taxes. However, we all know that this adage is only half true. You don't *have* to pay taxes. And if you choose to "just say no" to the IRS for a few filing seasons, I'm sure our federal government is more than willing to provide you with a roof over your head, three square meals a day, access to a library, and visiting privileges on weekends. So, maybe we're left with only one sure thing in life, death.

However, death is something that no one likes to talk about very much. In fact, the very thought of our own death makes most people want to distract themselves under a mountain of busyness. A lot of people would probably prefer to think that death is simply something that happens to other people, but not to them. "It's not that I'm afraid to die," Woody Allen once said, "I just don't want to be there when it happens."

There is an old Russian proverb which says, "Death does not take the old but the ripe." And as we hear today's gospel reading, it would be easy to get the feeling that, when death came to the home of Mary and Martha, that proverb rang as true (and as terrible) as ever. The death of Lazarus was probably not a "good death." Lazarus didn't die after a long, fulfilling, and fruitful life. And his death probably didn't take place after a long, and dignity-robbing disease.

After all, had it been a case of "thank goodness, the end is near for Lazarus," Mary and Martha wouldn't have sent word to Jesus that their brother was ill. Rather, they would have let Lazarus die, and then have called Jesus to attend the funeral. So it was an untimely death. Death did not come as a friend to that household, but as a thief; wrenching apart relationships, leaving behind a numb emptiness, perhaps even a bitterness, in those whom Lazarus left behind.

One of the most profound words in this passage, at least as it relates to us, is the word "if." Martha and Mary each said to Jesus, "Lord, *if* you had been here, my brother would not have died." It was as strong an accusation against Jesus as we might read about in any of the Gospels. And it's hard to blame the sisters for bringing it up. Because the reality of the situation was that Jesus had *not* been there; in fact, he had remained two more days where he was after getting the news of Lazarus' illness. So, in every sense, their "if" was as legitimate, as it was useless. "If" is as inevitable, as it is haunting, as it is futile. The "if" of tragedy is born of events that should not have happened, but have; and we tell ourselves that things could have been different, *if* life were fair, or *if* we were just more in control.

There is only one hope that Jesus offers to Mary and Martha when they present their "if" to him. It is the same hope the Church has to give to the "ifs" that unavoidably happen to all who live in the suffering, and death-dealing world that we do. It is the hope that is proclaimed at

every service for the burial of the dead: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

And to show them that he is not merely waxing poetic, or talking symbolically, or simply caught up in homiletic hyperbole, Jesus performs an act so earth-shaking, so difficult to explain, so totally hair-raising, that the religious authorities in Jerusalem will immediately call for his arrest. Apparently, whoever raises the dead must themselves be put to death.

The author and theologian Robert Capon once wrote that Jesus never met a corpse he didn't raise. And he's right. Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, even as the mourners are beginning to weep and wail. The son of the widow from Nain is raised up, as his body is being carried to his place of burial. And here, in today's gospel reading, after Lazarus has been dead four days, Jesus raises him from death. The only feat more spectacular, and more amazing, that Jesus could perform in this seemingly progressive series of death-defying miracles, would be if he could somehow raise himself from the dead. But who could believe that would ever be possible? And so, for the characters in our gospel reading, it remains to be seen what Jesus will do next.

In this world of ours, no matter how many tragedies we encounter, no matter how many “ifs” haunt us in their aftermath, the truth of the Gospel message is this: Jesus brings life out of death. The good news is that we do not have to wait to be buried to experience Jesus as resurrection and life. All we have to do is surrender. All we have to do is to open our hearts with a child-like trust, and yield in faith to the people that Jesus sends our way, opening ourselves to them, and allowing them to unbind us and let us go.

Let us pray: O God, who gives life and hope to those who have none: Send into our lives, when we most need it, men and women of faith, whose words and actions are conduits of your grace and love, that we may find light when we are in darkness, hope when we are in despair, and the promise of new life when we are near death; that we may know you as resurrection and life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*