

Homily for March 29th, 2020 - 5th Sunday of Lent

Before you read any further, take out your Bible and read John 11:1-45. (The Bible is that thick book covered in dust that you may be using as a coaster!). Read it? Good. It is this Sunday's gospel reading of the raising of Lazarus. One question arising from that story that still prompts much debate is: Was Lazarus resuscitated or resurrected by Jesus?

Some say he was clearly resuscitated, not resurrected. His physical life was restored, but he would die again just like everyone else. Jesus, on the other hand, was resurrected. He didn't come back in an earthly body to die again; he came back in a resurrected body that would live forever.

However, others say Lazarus was resurrected, not resuscitated because he didn't just lose consciousness for a short period of time and was revived; he was clearly dead in the tomb for four days! Moreover, Jesus says, "***I am the resurrection and the life.***" He didn't say, "I am the resuscitation and the life"

For myself, arguing over who is using the right word or the right definition is to miss the point. The point for me is that Jesus has power over death. Jesus has power over something I am powerless in front of. What I can't control, Jesus can. Jesus can still call forth life from people and situations that we say are "passed the point of no return." He is the Lord of the living and the dead, and so for him there is no line drawn in the sand that he cannot cross. There is no darkness, no misery, no pain, or helplessness that is so great that Jesus say, "I can't go there." I think that's why in the Apostles' Creed we say, "***He (referring to Jesus) descended into hell.***" Hell, in our minds, is the point of no return. But even there, Jesus is offering love and breathing peace. This is the God of second chances, third chances, fourth chances, etc. (Aside. Mulligan means balding or tonsured, but in golf it means "second chance." What a perfect name for a balding priest!)

Let's look at these three vignettes separately and then put them in a blender and see what comes out.



Vignette #1. Look at Holman Hunt's painting entitled, "The Light of the World." The original hangs in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England, however, you have all seen one version or another of this painting, even if just on a pray card. In last Sunday's gospel of the man born blind, Jesus actually says, ***"I am the light of the world"*** (Jn. 9:5).

There is Jesus standing outside a closed, and presumably locked, door. He is holding a light. The door, on his side, has no door handle. The assumption is that you, inside the room, must take the initiative to invite Jesus in. You have to open the door from the inside. Jesus cannot and will not act without your initiative. Hold that image.

Vignette #2. This is my paraphrased and shortened version of a true story recounted by Fr. Ron Rolheiser. A young woman away at university is experiencing loneliness, depression, and worst of all, is suicidal. Her concerned parents tell her to come home immediately and not to worry about anything else except getting better. While at home, the young lady is surrounded by the best care that therapy, medicine, and loving parents could provide.



Nevertheless, after three weeks of feeling confined, helpless and enveloped in darkness, she commits suicide. Her world was a world of complete hopelessness where she did not have the energy to even cry out for, much less receive, help from anymore. Hold that image.

Vignette #3. It is the day Jesus rose from the dead and the disciples have locked themselves in the Upper Room out of fear. The Risen Lord appears to them without the need to boot down the door or jimmy the lock. He just appears. He is the Lord of the living and the dead, so locked doors and sealed tombs are no problem for him.



Standing before the disciples Jesus doesn't berate them; instead, he breathes on them. This is the new creation. The original creation began with the Creator breathing upon the clay of the earth giving life to Adam. The second creation begins with Jesus breathing on his lifeless disciples and saying, "**Peace be with you.**" Hold that image.

Let's put Vignette #1, #2, and #3 in a blender and see if we can make better sense of the Lazarus story.

Holman's painting, as inspiring as it is, presents an incomplete theology, an incomplete understanding of God. While God respects our free will and always hopes we will take the initiative to open the door and invite Him in, God is not, however, powerless to act without our permission. Doors without exterior handles, locked doors, and sealed tombs are big deals for us but not for God. The young university student who committed suicide could not find the strength to open the door from the inside and no one had the key to open it from the outside. Yet, when she woke on the other side, I believe she found Christ standing inside her fear and darkness breathing out his peace. When we can't get to God, God always has a way of still getting to us.

Similarly, when the disciples dared not leave the Upper Room, and even went to great lengths of locking themselves in, Jesus still found a way in. Jesus not only entered the room, he, more importantly, entered their fear and darkness. When they were doing everything to hide from the world, Jesus was still searching for them and not giving up until he breached their isolation. He was like a bloodhound on a trail. No wonder one poet referred to him as the "hound of heaven."

Likewise, Lazarus lived in the land of the dead for four days. He was passed the point of no return. But we must learn, that Lazarus, and eventually you and me, are dealing with the Lord of the living and the dead. Death, darkness, and a huge boulder cut Lazarus off from the land of the living. He couldn't access life so life accessed him. ***"I am the resurrection and the life."*** Jesus, taking a chapter from the Creator, breathed life back into Lazarus by simply calling his name, "Lazarus...come out."

COVID-19 has us hemmed in, "entombed" you might say. But when we cannot get out, when we cannot find the door handle, the resurrection and the life still find us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Paul". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and "P".