

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A
March 29, 2020
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“Do you believe this?”

Words we heard in today’s Gospel, words that almost any one of us could utter, and, at the risk of bringing up a sore subject, words that I miss hearing from announcers as we make our way through the NCAA playoffs, aka March Madness. Each year there is a team or two that comes as heavy favorites to win it all, just as there are one or two that make it in by the skin of their teeth. And it isn’t long before these two ends of the spectrum meet.

In the various conversations before, during, and after the game, it is clear that the underdog seems to be lucky to be even playing against a team which deserves to be there. Sometimes, it even sounds like folks felt that the #1 seed deserved to win and the underdog deserved to lose. Hence the great surprise when the upset of the tournament, the Cinderella story continues on to leave the favorite lying in their wake. People are incredulous, wondering to themselves and aloud, “Do you believe this?”

It is not a strange phenomenon really. We have a developed sense of what’s right and wrong, of what should happen and what shouldn’t. Sure, we like to pull for the underdog on principle, but how often do we honestly expect them to win. Instead, we assume that things will go a certain way, and when they don’t we are left stunned, perhaps in joy if it is our team doing the upsetting, but stunned nonetheless. The same can be said for the world outside the sports arena, where when things don’t go according to plan, we find ourselves at a loss.

Which brings us to today’s Gospel. “Do you believe this?” While this is an essential question to the interactions today, there is an earlier question which provides some perspective for those gathered in Bethany and for us, and it is this, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Those looking on the scene know that Jesus has the power to heal, and that he could have saved Lazarus from death if he wanted to do so. But without realizing it, the question makes an assumption in asking it. The assumption is that Lazarus deserves to be healed. And, whether consciously or unconsciously, yoked to that assumption is the common thought throughout humanity that we deserve what we want, what we think is fair, to have happen. And because Jesus had been healing, because Lazarus was a beloved friend, the people gathered around today express confusion because it seems to them that Lazarus deserved to live. But sometimes the favorite loses, and in today’s Gospel Lazarus died.

We struggle to understand when things don’t go as we expect. We look on the terrible things of this world, wondering how God can allow bad things to happen to good people, but like the people of Bethany, we are beginning from the wrong place altogether. Now, I am in no way suggesting that God is the cause of our present circumstances, but we assume that we deserve good, when in reality, what we ought to ask in light of the fall and sin is this: why do good things happen to bad people? And I’m not just talking about drug dealers and murderers, but you and me.

The truth of our human condition is this: we do not deserve anything from God. He created us, sustains us, provides for us, loves us, all out of the goodness of who he is. To which we have, from the beginning of time to this very day, responded with sin, with abandonment, with rejection, even fear and hate. Having

been given everything, we throw it away for something less, something other than what God would have for us.

That is, until we need or want or expect something. Then we deserve to be beneficiaries of God's grace and mercy and infinite love. Then because we did something nice one time, the divine vending machine in the sky will give us what we are owed. But God doesn't owe us anything. And Lazarus, as hard as it is to hear, doesn't deserve to be healed. He was a sinner, and so are we. Death is what is owed to us, is what we have earned for ourselves, and not a thing more.

The ministry of Jesus though is a ministry of grace, a good gift freely offered to bad people. Which is why there is more to the story. God is not interested in a temporary fix that postpones the inevitable. We wait to see what the Lord will do. We wait to see what hope there may still be. We wait now in today's Gospel, just as we will wait in the course of the holy days ahead. And though in both cases we know the story, it is not for us to rush through it. We must walk with the Lord. We must wait on the Lord.

In the midst of that waiting, and of our own waiting in this season of sickness and death, the Lord offers those oh so familiar words. Reassuring words as we draw ever nearer to that for which we are preparing. Comfortable and comforting words as we too stand before Lazarus' tomb, facing our own mortality in Scripture and in the world.

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believe in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." He is saying, you know that undefeated record which death holds over all of humanity? I'm here to end it. I'm here to turn the tables on death and life itself.

"Do you believe this?"

Set in context, we begin to see the wide-ranging consequences of his question to Martha. It calls to mind the Lenten preparation we have been observing, it flashes Holy Week before our eyes, and, I pray, it kindles hope in our hearts. For weeks we have been fasting and praying, seeking the will of God with an ever-deepening fervor. That search has taken on a new dimension of late, and one short week from now we will hear the words, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" followed on Good Friday with, "It is finished" as the tension between life and death will come to a crescendo that culminates in silence and a tomb. But not yet.

Before we finish Lent, before we reach Easter or Good Friday, we stop in front of another tomb. Lazarus is dead, and a question remains before us just as it was asked of Martha. "Do you believe this?" It is this question that sets the final stage for all that upon which we are about to embark. It asks us to reflect on the Lent which we have observed. It asks us to wait when hope seems to run out. It asks us to decide, do we really believe all of this? Is Jesus who he says he is?

I invite us to pause today and ponder this. If he is, then there is more than a tomb for Lazarus just as there is more than a tomb for us. If he is, then our Lenten preparations are not in vain but draw us deeper into the mystery we are about to enter. If he is, then there is still more to come when we finally hear him say, "It is finished." Death may have been undefeated prior to Easter, but the true champion is only now about to enter the arena.

Jesus is who he says he is. Jesus is I am, the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world. He is the one who cries out today, "Lazarus, come out."

Do you believe this? I do. Do you?