

“This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Last Thursday, as six third graders, their chaperone and I emerged into the light from the dark evergreen forest at Bouverie Preserve, the quietest of the girls turned to me and said, “This is so incredible. It’s just like all the nature shows on TV I never watch.” When I raised an eyebrow, she smiled and said, “I don’t watch them because you have to experience these things before they can be real.”

She was talking about being in Nature, but she might just as well have been talking about Lent. Lent is the season we pause to experience God: both the scope of God’s power and the intimacy of God’s love. Nowhere are both more deeply revealed than in the story of the raising of Lazarus.

A man dies. A man is raised from the dead. And Jesus breaks down and weeps. Grandeur and intimacy. A love that is stronger than death.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

According to Jewish law, a dead person was theoretically revivable for up to three days. By the fourth day, however, that person was really and truly gone. Jesus raises Lazarus on the fourth day, when, as Martha said, “There is already a stench.”

Everything we have been taught in our rational, technical, and scientific culture tells us that stuff like this just doesn’t happen except in the world of fantasy and

wishful thinking. If we're going get down and dirty with one another, we have to admit that death is the end. And of course it is an end, but...There's always a "but."

The new cannot be fully born until the old has fully passed away. Until we breathe the stench of it. Until we enter the underworld of sorrow and baptize it with our tears.

We've been living in a decomposing society for 2000 years. All around us a world rages. The powerful are bombing, blasting and drilling a planet. The streets scream. People are trying to live normal lives in the middle of chaos. We approach the valley of the dry bones. And God says, "Do not shout. Do not fight. Mourn what is passing. Water the dry bones with your tears."

New life is the essence of Jesus' teaching. New life is the Good News Paul talks about in all his letters. Here's perhaps the most famous example, from First Corinthians. Many scholars believe it was the Church's earliest Creed: "Now I want you to understand, brothers and sisters, the good news that I proclaimed to you...For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles."

Jesus lives. It is up to us to make him visible. It is up to us to walk in love as Christ loved us and live the resurrection he showed us. We are his second coming. Jesus gives comfort and joy to a world that is always threatening us with death.

Close your eyes. Imagine Jesus sitting beside you.

Nature is full of death. Winters obscure our hope. But every spring life returns and dry branches burst into bloom and leaf. Rain washes the soil and the dead are reborn. Our lives, too, are full of loss, but if we can hold God even in the depths of sadness, God will come and re-knit the bones which hold our broken souls.

The animals returned to a dead Chernobyl. During Covid, when life compelled us to rest, the skies turned blue and sheep gamboled in children's playgrounds. About ten years ago, a river otter, believed to be extinct in California, turned up in Marin County.

In his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker argued that human civilization and culture are elaborate defense mechanisms against the terror of our own mortality. Instead of facing our fears, human beings create "immortality projects" for the ages, but all these rest on a foundation, not of acceptance of the way things are, but a defiant denial of reality. Being in denial takes a lot of energy. Billions of barrels of oil are needed to fuel our denial. Eventually, we all collapse from exhaustion.

That's the problem with mass and militant societies. They run on conquest. Reality runs on acceptance. Empires take. Love gives. Empires believe they can solve

the problem of death by killing people. They fail to see that this never works. It's a law of the universe that until we can solve the problem, it will just keep coming back in more a virulent form. Despite some very sophisticated theorizing on the human condition, little has changed since the Trojan War. We still think wars are winnable. That we can wipe out our enemies forever. We still don't realize that what we hate in others is what we hate so much inside ourselves that we refuse to admit it even exists.

Don't deny, says Jesus. Repent. And I will give you life.

As I said earlier, the story of the raising of Lazarus is the story of what happens when we give in and let God love us.

It is also a story of waiting on God's time.

That's the reason for the curious detail of Jesus' delay. When news arrives that Lazarus is seriously ill, Jesus doesn't go to him at once but tells his disciples "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." And he stays where he was for two days.

So that by the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus was already four days dead, and the tomb was stinking.

And despite his resolve, when he saw Mary weeping, Jesus, too, burst into tears.

Endings, whether happy or not, are like this. We weep. We weep when a baby is born. We weep at weddings. We weep when people we love die. It is an involuntary response, like shivering in the cold or sweating in the heat. Tears bless and baptize our

moments of grief, loss, and joy. When Jesus weeps over Lazarus, he is weeping over us all. He weeps for our ruined earth and our broken hearts. In a very short while, Jesus himself will die and he weeps for himself, and for all who love him, because there can be no grief without love. And maybe Jesus wished it didn't have to be so hard but it is hard, because giving birth to new life is hard and it literally breaks us open. Taking the dark with the light. Trusting a God who loves us so much he dies to show us that death is not forever. In raising Lazarus, Jesus saw God raising himself.

Blessed are those who mourn.

The ones who were there saw a power greater than any on earth.

And those who were powerful were terrified.

When Jesus brought Lazarus back to life he did what no emperor could ever do. Not even the most powerful emperor on earth.

If the emperor cannot control us through fear, he has lost.

That was why the empire had to put Jesus to death.

This is the road we walk during Holy Week. Will it be the way of death, or the way of Life? The answer is harder than you think as the fickle crowd in Jerusalem will make so clear next Sunday. The one thing none of us can do is skip over it. The one thing none of us can do is deny it.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Let’s take a deep breath and try and take Jesus at his Word. Amen.