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Holy Faith, Santa Fe
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Lent 5 — Year A
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
John 11:1-45

But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

In the name of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lazarus.

For a man who died 2,000 years ago — died twice, in fact — the man sure gets around — in book titles alone.

A quick peek on Amazon shows the Lazarus Life, the Lazarus Project, Lazarus Awakening, The Lazarus Curse, the Lazarus Vendetta and thousands more.

As a title, Lazarus is alive and very popular because with 3 syllables it conveys something critical about the subject matter: Somehow, some way, whether it's physical or psychological or spiritual sense or some other sense, the book is going to have something to do with going from death to life.

A very popular topic. A very popular story, especially this time of year. It is THE Christian story. It is our story. It's a true story with real people in it.

There's no better way to examine a Gospel story than to put yourself in it. So, in today's Gospel story, the raising of Lazarus, who might you be?

Perhaps one of Jesus' disciples?

In that case, you've just narrowly escaped being killed in Jerusalem and have retreated across the Jordan River to a place of the comparative safety, only to hear Jesus tell you to turn around and head right back into the lion's den of Judea.

How does that feel? What are you likely to say? "Good move, Master; that will surprise them!"

Or something more like, "Rabbi, the religious authorities were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ... And taking us with you?

Thomas, bless him, shows bravado: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." And if I were one of the other disciples, I might be thinking, "Speak for yourself, Tommy."

Consider what that journey to Bethany must have been like, each step taking you closer to where you absolutely do not want to go, with each step becoming more and more frightened.

Or might you be Lazarus' sister Martha, the busy one, the one who gets things done, remember? If you're Martha, I bet you're the one who arranged to get the word to Jesus that Lazarus was ill in the first place.

If you're Martha, you're into efficiency, and you've sent the word in time, but nothing has happened except your brother's gotten sicker and sicker. You're probably looking after his care, too. In some way, the responsibility for your brother's life has fallen on you — and he's not getting better, he's getting worse. And there's no sign of friend Jesus.

What are you thinking? Did my message go astray? Maybe Jesus couldn't be found? Perhaps something happened to him.

But I think it's worth assuming that whomever you sent with word of Lazarus' illness would have returned and told you when he's given Jesus the word. And how long Jesus delayed before heading to Bethany. And so, what do you feel as you see him finally walk toward you? What do you say?

Here's what Martha says: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," and then she adds, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Sounds like a bit of emotional blackmail, doesn't it?

"You COULD have kept him alive, Jesus, but you didn't. Now, DO something."

So, yes, a bit of emotional blackmail, but also a statement of faith, yes? Martha would have heard of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead and raising the son of the widow of Nain from his funeral bier. If he could do that for strangers ... thus the statement, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Or you could be Mary, even more connected to Jesus than is Martha. If you're Mary, how deep is your disappointment in your friend, the healer with amazing powers. For the first time since you and your sister and brother met him, he has let you down, and the pain of it is intense.

When you hear Jesus is coming, you are so consumed with disappointment and grief that you don't go to greet him, don't even move, you just stay at home. When Martha tells you that Jesus is calling for you, then you go but even then the first words out of your mouth, spoken with tears, are reproof: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Then the bystanders see Jesus' tears and some think, "Boy, he really did love him, didn't he?" But others think, "If he loved him so much, why didn't he save him?"

That could be you, too. That could be me. That has been me. If God loved my mother so much, why didn't he get her past that last illness? If he loved my father so much, why did he allow him to suffer with cancer for all those months?

Back to Bethany:

At this point in the story, if you are a disciple, you are fearful and questioning. If you are one of the sisters, you are frustrated and questioning. If you're a bystander, you're doubtful and questioning.

And then Jesus takes everyone — disciples, sisters, bystanders — to the tomb, prays to his Father, utters a few words and calls a dead man out of his grave.

For all of you — disciples, sisters, bystanders — doubts are dispersed. Faith is reborn. Frustration turns to amazement and utter joy. Martha and Mary, the disciples, the bystanders all see the power and glory of God.

Now there must have been some followers of Jesus who didn't make the journey to Bethany — too dangerous, too much trouble, too much something or other. And then they get word: Jesus did WHAT? Imagine missing out on a miracle of that magnitude.

What's the lesson of the story of Lazarus? Here's one: There are times when we feel God is ignoring us, or is late, or is leading us where WE don't think we want to go.

Trust him, follow him, go with him just the same. At the end of a difficult journey, give him the chance to show YOU the power and glory of God.

Among the people in this story you could be, I haven't mentioned Lazarus.

But, in fact, you ARE Lazarus. All of us are. Eventually, regardless of how often God answers our prayers or the prayers of our loved ones, each of us will die.

And one day, Jesus will call OUR name — as he called that of Lazarus. But when he calls our name, he'll be calling us to life that's new and indestructible.

I love our Rite I burial service, but the Rite II has one advantage. In both rites, we begin with the words Jesus spoke to Martha, but the Rite II translation of the Greek leaves out the definite articles, which gives the words even more power and immediacy.

Jesus said, "I AM resurrection and I AM life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

And Martha, despite all she doesn't understand, looks into the eyes of Jesus and gives her answer. Despite all that we don't understand, let her answer also be ours:

Yes, Lord, I believe. ... Amen.