SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 29, 2020
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Choral Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
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Jesus Wept

At the beginning of her recent book, 'Late Migrations – A natural history of love and loss,' Margaret Renkl reflects on the death of her maternal grandmother and how her grandfather passed away just a month later. She uses this most beautiful phrase, *"the shadow side of love is always loss, and grief is only love's own twin."* [1.]

When you love someone very, very much and that love is mutual, there is always the possibility of grief and loss. As is carved into the pillar where the 9/11 memorial stands – *"Grief is the price we pay for love."*

And many of us, in our lives, have also known the grief and the loss of unrequited love. It is easy to think that that kind of love is only experienced by human beings and might even be a twisted kind of grief or loss – the sort that would be felt by a stalker or abusive person. But the scriptures are full of examples of unrequited love and the powerful sense of loss and grief felt by God himself:

"What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early," we read in Hosea. (Hosea 6:4)

But the love in today's Gospel reading is the love of friends – best friends. Friends who enjoy one another's company; who share easy conversation; who enjoy sitting at the supper table together. That was the friendship that Jesus had with Lazarus of Bethany, and his two sisters, Martha and Mary.

"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

The shadow side of love is always loss, and grief is only love's own twin.

However, as we heard in the Gospel reading, *"Some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

And they were not the only ones who felt this; we feel this so keenly when we hear the almost pathetic words of Martha, *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."*

Mary did not even come out to meet him at first.

Since we know how the story is going to end, we might assume that Martha is expecting some kind of miracle. But her response to Jesus talking about the resurrection makes it clear that she does not expect to see her brother again for a very long time: *"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."* For a Jew at the time of Jesus, 'the last day' was a very long way off.

The response of Jesus is one of the great 'I am' sayings of John's Gospel; *"I am the resurrection and I am the life."* Earlier in John's Gospel, we heard Jesus say that he would bring life to those who believed in him:

"And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day." (6:39)

This power to raise up – to bring life – does not come simply from the authority that Jesus exercised. It resided in his very being as the Word made flesh, the glory of the Father – full of grace and truth:

"<u>in him</u> was life, and the life was the light of all people." (1:4)

Where Jesus went, there went life in all its fullness.

"Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." (5:25)

And this Lazarus was dead and he was going to hear the voice of the Son of God. When Jesus arrived in Bethany he discovered that Lazarus had been dead for four days. Common Jewish belief at the time believed that the soul hovered over the body for three days and that on the fourth day decomposition truly began. So at the time of Jesus, this fourth day was significant – Lazarus was well and truly dead. There is fear in this story – *"Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."* Nevertheless, Jesus greatly disturbed in spirit, commands that the tomb be opened. What happened next? Jesus prayed to his Father in the way that he had prayed before and the way that would pray again, including in the garden of Gethsemane and in his dereliction on the Cross and, as we find in the prayer of Jesus – it is prayer attuned to the father's love for the world – a prayer of *thanksgiving.* Jesus 'makes Eucharist' at the tomb of his friend; *"Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."*

And Jesus required the cooperation of the family of Lazarus in this miracle or sign of his glory. Lazarus appeared still bound in the strips of cloth used in Jewish burial rites. *"Unbind him!"* said Jesus. In the Chantry Chapel altar piece, you will see this scene depicted. The strips of cloth represent mortality and death but they require help to take them off. They are same kind of strips of cloth that would be used to bind Jesus at his own burial, just as he had been bound in swaddling cloths at his birth when placed in the manger. Birth and Death; The one who is the beginning and the end experiences birth and death himself.

But, on the day of resurrection, Jesus did not need anyone to unbind him; the one who conquered death could not be bound. *"in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."* The raising of Lazarus reminds us that we, too, will hear the voice of the Son of God and Jesus will give life to our mortal bodies. As we heard in our Epistle reading today, *"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you."*

A few days ago, I was with someone who was dying. At this time of pandemic, there is so much fear of death and those of us who have family and friends who are frail and elderly, or chronically ill, are fearful even to visit in case we inadvertently carry the virus to them. And many of us have friends or loved ones who are far away. For those of us who have lost a loved one, the story of the raising of Lazarus can feel like a cheat. Why him? Why not the person that I love? And if you have ever had the heart-wrenching duty to sit at the bed of a dying child, you will know exactly how conflicted those feelings can be.

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At this time of crisis; of fear and anxiety; we hear again the raising of Lazarus. We hear again the voice of the Son of God. Perhaps, though, it is not the reversal of death that we should be thinking about but, rather, the fact that Jesus is *life* and knows everything about the shadow side of love; who knows about grief itself; and now, even now, my friends, is pleading for us at the right hand of his Father.

1. 'Late Migrations – A natural history of love and loss,' by Margaret Renkl, page 26