

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, May 1, 2022

The Third Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*

on

John 11:17-44

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Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter, 2022

In the name of the Risen Christ,

Happy Easter!

Yes, this joyful season continues, no matter the weather. We are barely a third of the way through this fifty day meditation on the Resurrection and its meaning for us, seeking to give shape to what has happened to us in Christ's Resurrection, fifty days to reckon with how best to say thank you, and then, by God's grace to say our own hearty "Yes, Lord." and to claim our share of that risen life.

As is expected throughout Easter, the Gospel readings feature the Resurrection experiences of the disciples and friends of Christ. This morning, we found ourselves with Peter, Thomas, and several others on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, grilling fish with a resolute and sobering Christ, with healing words of restoration and commissioning for ever more ministry in his Name.

Tonight, we rest our weary imaginations in the village of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, however *not* during the first Easter, but back before all that at the time during Jesus' ministry. It may be taking place before Easter, but tonight's gospel is certainly illuminated by the Easter light, a kind of foretaste of Easter, in a way. As did Easter, this story begins at the grave, at a place of tears, not triumph, certainly, for Jesus' dear friend Lazarus has died. Mary and Martha's beloved brother.

Before this point, the sisters had sent a message to Jesus telling him that Lazarus was ill. Jesus comes, but he does not come soon enough. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has already been in the grave for four days. "Where was he?" one can imagine the sister's saying to themselves. "Why did he wait? Too late, Lord, too late." And when he arrives, Jesus gets an earful.

From the gathered company: "He could open the eyes of the blind man, but can he keep his friend from dying?" From Martha: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." From Mary, too, "Lord, if you had been here..." "What have you done, Lord?" they cry. "Where were you at the death of our kin? Of your friend? What is it worth to have eyes to see, if this is what you have to see? What good is the love of God if there is such death?" And, in one of the most piercing

lines of the entire scriptures, Mary takes Jesus' own words that have led them to new life, and uses them to beckon Jesus to the place of death.

To Jesus' dead friend. To her dead brother. See the grim reversal. "Yes, Lord," Mary says, "you have said 'come and see', but I say to you, Lord, come and see this. Come and see."

And Jesus wept.

He weeps because he sees. He weeps because Mary shows him the grave. He sees its truth when the other disciples couldn't bear. For earlier they had said that Lazarus was sleeping. But Jesus tells them plainly, "Lazarus is dead."

Lazarus' death is not just Mary and Martha's brother. He is our own. Lazarus is our brother, our sister, our mother, our father, our beloved. And at their graves we rail like Mary, "Lord, if you had been here, they would not have died." But we also cry out like Mary, "Come and See, Lord." And Jesus accepts that invitation. His love leads him to the place of death. Not only the grave of a friend, but his own, for it leads him to risk his own life, too, to come to Bethany, for the disciples warn him that people will try to kill him there. And they are right.

But Jesus comes to see his friends just the same. As John wrote only a chapter before, Jesus the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, for his friends. His deep commitment is to be greatly disturbed with us. To weep with us. And we see tears on our Lord's face, bitter tears for Lazarus, God's love flowing from eyes that see.

But, as with Easter itself, Jesus does not stop with tears. He helps *us* to see through the tears. He shows us that life is changed, not ended. That death is real, but conquered. He has a plan for Mary and Martha. He tells them that in believing they will see the glory of God. He asks them to move the stone from the cave. He has to insist, because they are afraid of the stench. But they do. And he says, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus comes out, but his face is covered in cloth, his hands are tied, his feet are bound. And Jesus says to the sisters, "Loose him, and let him go." It is a shared action, Lazarus' return. Jesus raises, but the sisters have to release him. Mary and Martha have to unbind their brother. And they do.

Are we up to this task? Are we prepared to hear the words of our Lord at the graves before which we stand: "Loose them, and let them go"? Death has not been abolished, but death has been conquered, in Christ's life, in the Holy Spirit's love. Can we live as if that were the case?

What does it look like to "unbind Lazarus and let him go"? You know we Christians sing at funerals? Have you ever thought of how striking that is? We sing together in grief and in hope, at funerals, at wakes, at graves, even at our deathbeds, if the occasion allows. Music bound up in of Jesus' love, Jesus' cross, and resurrection light.

This is as it should be. May we all have our Alleluia songs at this time of trial. In the burial office at every funeral, the priest proclaims great hope and great promise. "All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." This is our Christian response at the gate and place of death: Easter song.

In John, the badge of all people who have experienced the resurrection, Mary Magdalene and the disciples, they say “I have seen the Lord.” They see where things end up. Death is penultimate, but life in God is ultimate.

Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus assures his disciples, Jesus assures us:

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

As the pain of labor is not the final word of new birth, death is not the final word, God has the ultimate word, a word that we can enter into, a life that we can “come and see.” We see this in Lazarus. We see it in Christ in Easter. And the raising of our friend Lazarus, coupled with our unbinding of him, our letting him go, this prepares us to follow Jesus’ loving path through the vale of tears and onward to the glory of the resurrection where God will wipe away every tear. And on the other side of that valley, with Christ beside us, and his Spirit in our hearts, his song on our lips, we will see the Lord.