

Sermon at St. Francis Lutheran Church
Lent 4, March 13th, 2005
Ezekiel 37; John 11

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Let us pray,

O God, you have called us out of fear into hope, out of sorrow into joy, out of death into life. Walk with us now, as we consider your word to us, and stay with us along the whole path of the future that leads always back to you. Send your Holy Spirit through these words, and through our hearts, that we might truly know that you grieve with us, that you laugh with us, that you marvel with us and sing with us; through the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our resurrected brother, we pray. Amen.

I.

It's never too early for the resurrection. For many, it is too late to be raised four days after their deaths, and their resurrection will not come, like it did for Lazarus, in time for their friends and families to be cheered and comforted by their renewed presence. For, like Jesus, many have lost friends, like our Harry whom we remember today, and many of us have lost fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, in-laws, mentors and shepherds along the way, partners, wives, husbands, and lovers, for whom the resurrection will take more time than it did for Lazarus to be fully realized. It's too late for so many reunions like the one Jesus arranged to show the glory of God, to inspire new songs and rekindle to magic of God's fire in the hearts of the faithful.

But, I hear the voice of Jesus say, it's never too early for the resurrection. And, as one of the ministers at my divinity school once said, when asked what gives her the energy to keep on living each day, she answered without hesitation: "The resurrection. Without the resurrection we'd all go to hell."

And though I chuckled when she said this, I think it speaks to the deep place of truth in each of our lives as Christians, and to the place of St. Francis Lutheran Church in these pivotal times, to the deep truth of this particular congregation.

The resurrection, like the Spanish inquisition, never comes when we might expect it, nor does it come when we want it to come. It cannot come too early. In fact, the resurrection is with us now. But in order for each of us to participate in the resurrection, we must first go through sorrow and pain and grief. Like Lazarus, like the whole house of Israel as we heard in the reading from Ezekiel, in order to be raised to new life, we must first die. We all die, and, I suspect, Jesus grieves each death as he grieves the death of his friend. But we do not die alone. We die in, with, and through Jesus. We die into the eternity of song to God, into the eternity of embrace with God.

II.

Still, thinking about today's Gospel passage, I wonder what Lazarus must have thought of Jesus while he lay dying? His sisters could see his death coming. Whatever it was that killed Lazarus, whether it be a fever, or a heart condition, or pneumonia, or something else, it took just days from the time that Mary and Martha first expressed concern to Jesus, when the illness really started to look bad, to the time when Lazarus died. Death came quickly to Lazarus.

Jesus loved Lazarus, and his sisters, Mary and Martha. So when Lazarus needed Jesus, when Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was very sick, why didn't he come? "Jesus," I can hear Lazarus saying weakly from his bed, "if you love me, come quickly. Come quickly, Jesus, because this disease is gripping my whole body. Come now, because if you wait, I might die. For the love of God, Jesus, come now! Help me, now!"

Instead of coming right away, Jesus had a job to do, and it involved Lazarus dying, in order to prove the glory of God in raising him from the dead and bring many to faith through that act. But Jesus would show more than the glory of God after the death of Lazarus. Jesus would show his most vulnerable self. Hold on to this picture of Jesus, exposed and vulnerable, weeping, no, bursting into tears, for his dead friend and for those who were greatly moved by his death. Jesus no doubt wept tears as well for his own impending, ignominious departure from the world, which was to come perhaps not much more than a week later. Jesus was deeply moved at the pain and death of Lazarus, and the suffering of those mourning that particular death.

Some have said that Lazarus was not indeed resurrected, because he would, presumably, have later died again. Some have suggested that, instead of being resurrected, Lazarus was resuscitated. If you ask me, four days is quite a long time to be dead before coming back to life. Jesus didn't heat Lazarus up like a slice of frozen pizza; he brought him back from the dead. "Lazarus, come out!" And come out, he did.

III.

These words, “come out,” mean a lot to many of us in this congregation who have experienced a coming out as gay men or lesbian women, who have come out as alcoholics or addicts to supportive networks, or who have come out in some other way as vulnerable people who cannot live all by ourselves, but must reach out to others, must nourish our faith in a church community, like this community of Saint Francis Lutheran Church.

This community of Saint Francis has, like many communities, also endured much loss and change, and change is often experienced as loss of some kind. Such loss and change will often bring sorrow and pain and grief. The loss of many members and friends, from the 80s to the present, to AIDS and other illnesses and accidents, rightly causes deep and long-lasting grief. Saying goodbye today to our Harry Lien, a man of beautiful temperament, of love for this life and God, and of care for his friends and fellow humans, is difficult for me personally, as for many here.

The treatment by the wider church body of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America over nine years ago, that severed St. Francis’ standing as a member of that body, was a loss still felt especially at the feast of the expulsion on December 31st each year.

Saying goodbye to long-standing pastoral leaders, first to Pastor Jim DeLange some years ago, more recently to Pastor Michael Hiller, today to Father George Belcher, and soon to Pastors Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart, opens up a place of grieving for the Saint Francis community that will take time to heal.

I wish to speak for a moment to Father George, who has ably led Saint Francis for more than two years, through the good times and the hard times. George, you have shown yourself a man of deep faith and friendship to those here at Saint Francis. You have, like Jesus in today’s Gospel, wept with

those who wept, and you have laughed mightily with those who laughed. You have been a friend and father in the faith to me, and to those here at Saint Francis. And as sure as I stand here right now speaking these words, I am sure that God is pleased with you, and speaks the words over you, “well done, good and faithful servant.” I am sure, without a doubt, that God will be there with you and Helen, with David, with those at home and those far away who mean the world to you. And the love and prayers of Saint Francis and its people goes with you as a sure sign of God’s love for you.

As death in Christ leads to eternal life, the change of welcoming new friends each week to Saint Francis, and the prospect of new leaders and shepherds, offers a certain excitement that God will continue to work miracles in this congregation, will continue to bring people into life through this community, will always continue to give vibrant, living energy for the walk of faith together, brothers and sisters together walking in the light of God to Glorify God in this place, and throughout the City of San Francisco and far beyond.

IV.

There are many comings-out, many small resurrections that undergird the main event, the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the body of all of God’s people. They are comings out, out of pain into comfort, out of fear into hope, out of dark nights of the soul into days where your morn shall rise, and all your days will be bright, in the light of Christ. This is certain for each of us, as for this congregation of Saint Francis.

This season of Lent, indeed, is a season of the difficult walk to the cross of Jesus, on which all of the sorrow and weight of the human soul meets with the depth of God’s mercy on us. It is in, with, and through the cross that the tears of God rain down upon the heads of women and men. It is from

these depths to which we all have actually sunk, that we may call out in certainty to God, counting on God's forgiveness; what more could we do to offend God? For God has come through death, the pain and humiliation of a death without peace, and destroyed death in raising Jesus from the dead.

No, it is never too early for the resurrection. For Harry, for Bob, for Millie, for Bruce, and for all the faithful departed of Saint Francis and all who have passed through our lives and entered the eternal walk with God sing the praises of the resurrection. They are free from death, free from tears of sorrow and longing for the source of all love and life, free from the bondage of sin and guilt, free from the worry about death and dying and pain. But they, and we, are not now, and never will be, bereft of God's love and care. They have joined the song of millions, which we will someday join, resurrected in eternity: "And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on; and when from death I'm free, I'll sing on. And when from death I'm free, I'll sing God's love for me, and through eternity I'll sing on, I'll sing on, and through eternity, I'll sing on."