

5th Sunday of Lent cycle A

There are two kinds of “ifs.” There are those which pertain to consequences: if we do this, then this will happen. **If** I throw this glass against a wall, then it will shatter and break. It’s a big jump from there to saying “and then somebody will step on the pieces and cut themselves.” It’s a risk, but not a certainty; it might follow but doesn’t have to follow, as opposed to the shattering of the glass, which would be consequence. On the other hand, there are the “ifs” of the past: if I had not thrown the glass against the wall, I would still have it today. Well, maybe I would and maybe I wouldn’t. Maybe, if I hadn’t thrown it, somebody else would have dropped it; maybe if I kept it, I would have lost it. Maybe I’d still have it, but might have chipped it, and unwittingly even cut my lip on it. The possibilities of what could have been the final outcome of things are countless; but the fact is, that when it comes to those forks in the road in the past, we can never really know what we missed by having one experience and not having another.

While most of our past “ifs” range somewhere from purposeless speculation to unlikely flights of fancy, in today’s Gospel reading we hear the word repeatedly, and not given as speculation but as a statement of true faith in the power of Christ. Both Martha and Mary, after the death of their brother Lazarus, upon encountering Jesus days after their brother’s death, declare “IF you had been here, he would not have died.” What an astonishing act of faith: they had seen some of the miracles Jesus had worked, no doubt the stories about his healings were making the rounds, and I’m certain that those stories were a good part of what brought them to faith. They didn’t just believe that he had *occasional* power: they believed that he had the power always and everywhere to heal people, and that had he been with Lazarus, Jesus’ power would have prevented the tragic outcome. They knew that while Jesus healed many, he didn’t come and heal all; but they believed with all their heart in Jesus’ love, they knew that Jesus, who had become a close friend of all three siblings, would certainly have chosen Lazarus to be one of the ones whom he would save. IF Jesus had been there three days prior, they believed, there would have been a different outcome. But what might that different outcome had been? Consider: Had Lazarus not died, they would not have seen Jesus weep over his death. Weep over a death which they would learn in just a matter of moments that Jesus had the power to overcome, that he knew he would overcome. Why weep when he knew that he had the power and the will to raise Lazarus? In two brief words—Jesus wept—Christian mourning is defined for us. Twice in this passage, Jesus is said to have become “perturbed”—bothered, upset, a tinge of anger—and both times it is when he sees the people weeping and mourning their loss. Jesus wept perhaps because he knew that, even though resurrection was only moments away, death had claimed Lazarus; his emotions declare his greatest enemy: Jesus is the Lord of Life, death is his great enemy, the ultimate manifestation of the power of the evil one. Jesus hated seeing Lazarus in that abode, separated from God, even for a time. And consider next: had Jesus been there, he may have demonstrated his power over death again, but not in the same way. This was not resuscitation; this was different, it was resurrection.

Jesus remained for days where he was; John reports that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. When it comes time to take away the stone closing the tomb, Martha declares “there will be a stench.” By then it was not just having the power to keep the circulation of blood going through Lazarus’ heart; this was power over the decay which follows death. And finally, consider the many people who learned what Jesus had done and began to believe in him. IF Jesus had been there when Lazarus died, if he had done a resessitation but not a resurrection, would they have come to believe? And had they not come to believe, what might have been the state of their souls for all eternity?

So often, it’s easy to look back at what might have been and imagine a better outcome. And many people, when they do that, begin to question God and his goodness; with all his power, why didn’t he direct a better outcome for us? Think of all the various ways that Martha and Mary could have reacted believing as they did that Jesus could have saved their brother, and knowing as they did that he was not there to do it. They could have shown anger: if you had been here, my brother would not have died; why weren’t you here? I thought you loved him; I thought you loved us; I thought we were your friends. They could have reacted with doubt: we really believed that he could have saved our brother, maybe he stayed away because he doesn’t really have that kind of power, maybe the other healings were just flukes, right time, right place and they were going to get well anyway. They could have reacted with resentment: yeah, we’ve got our brother back now, but why did you make us go through all the pain and anguish? But for all the reactions they could have had, Martha and Mary both had a faith which was unwavering: trusting in Jesus, in his power, in his will to do good, even when they couldn’t see the bigger picture; even when they couldn’t see that this act was to show forth God’s glory; and part of God’s glory is that he not only prevents death, he turns back death; whether it be after three days, three years, or three thousand years, Jesus is the strong man who alone can bind the devil, and take back what Satan stole from God in the beginning—the children of Adam and Eve.

The singular worst outcome of the fall—death—found Lazarus, just as the ripple effects of the fall continue to reach us all, just as they did Martha and Mary. And like Martha and Mary, it is easy to fill our relationship with God with so many “if only’s.” If only, Lord, you had made me more successful; if only I had been born into a different family; if only it hadn’t been for that accident, that disaster, those setbacks; if only you didn’t require such chastity, and generosity, and self-giving; if only being a disciple didn’t demand so much of my time and effort and will, then I would follow you. But here is where the two “ifs” merge: man may tell himself that if only *this* was different he would follow; but there’s still the old truism, maybe we would, and maybe we wouldn’t. Maybe it’s not because the path Jesus asks us to go down is so hard that one doesn’t follow him, but because man’s self-determination is so great. If we really have faith, we would see that while the journey is certainly not unimportant, what matters the most is arriving at the destination. Jesus knew that had he not resurrected Lazarus, those people who saw it, who were

not yet quite on board with him, would not have come to faith. Jesus sees our lives, with a penetrating knowledge that we cannot imagine; he sees where this is going; and his will is that we find our way to the Father's house; but he has revealed that the way to that glory is through his cross, which we must also take up in our turn.

Right before he raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus prayed to his Father, thanking his Father for hearing him, and for using this episode to bring more people to faith. Then he shouted, "Lazarus, come out." And he came out of the tomb, and Jesus said "untie him and let him go." Those words will reverberate in a couple of weeks, when Jesus conquers sin and death once for all, through his own resurrection. But we are the ones whom he will be calling to, to come out of the tombs; he will be ordering Satan to untie us, and let us go; and we are free to go with Jesus, or free to stay with his enemy, who has but a fraction of the power, and absolutely none of the love, which our Savior has. Paul explained this to the Romans: if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also." IF the Spirit dwells in us, then resurrection will be ours. We received that Spirit at baptism; now, ours is to make sure that we never drive him away from our souls. Martha and Mary looked back before their brother was returned to them, and imagined that there could have been a different outcome; and yes, there could have been; but in the bigger picture, thank goodness for everyone's sake there wasn't. And one day, we'll be able to look back and see that there could have been different outcomes for us in eternity. May we make sure that that reflection is one of gratitude and thanksgiving that we held on to the life God gave us at baptism, and that we answered Jesus' call to forsake the works of his enemy, and to instead, cling tightly to Christ.

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