

Year A – Lent Five – 02 April 2017
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

This morning I welcome you closer to Jerusalem. I invite you to continue stepping gently as we walk to Golgotha where we meet ourselves in the One who will hang on the cross. I encourage you to allow yourself to go deep into the darkness that I spoke of last week, that you might be better able to listen for God's voice as He calls you not to despair but to hope – a hope that can be found in the waiting ... in the darkness ... before the cross ... in front of the sealed tomb ...

You can escape if you wish. There are no shackles upon you, holding you here in the Lenten season of repentance and this time that expects us to self-examine and face what it is that God needed to send his Son for. Around us bright Easter colours and candies are everywhere. There is an anticipation that Easter is coming and with it comes at least a few days off school and work, if not anything else. You may choose to leave next Sunday morning after the Procession of the Palms and before the Passion of Christ. You could choose to bypass Holy Week entirely and simply reappear for Easter Day. But think what you would miss ...

There is a reason why we are invited to go deeper and to spend time in uncomfortable places. Only when we recognize how very much we need God's forgiveness; only when we become aware of how non-self-sufficient we are; only when we face the darkness that is indeed part of the human condition, can we truly begin to appreciate the depth of our need for Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the cross – a sacrifice that ensures that we do not need to make that sacrifice ourselves. Like that tomb we are approaching, which will be filled with Jesus' body, or like a tulip bulb planted deep in the cold, dark earth, it is from the truth of that darkness and solitude that will eventually emerge triumphant new life and hope.

And so, as we get closer to our Good Friday, I encourage you not to run from it but to approach it with gentleness and reverence. For in this journey, and in the pause at the cross before we reach the empty tomb, there is a love unbounded that you will best be able to receive if you are willing to simply "be" in this place of darkness.

Lazarus was in that place of darkness. He died and was buried in his tomb *before* Jesus was able to reclaim the beauty that is the tomb. Lazarus died. He was with the dead. He had no hope of eternal life. He had no awareness that there would, or could be, anything beyond simply "falling asleep with the dead." Martha and Mary believed, but their belief was based on what could still happen yet ... with Jesus' help. But for Lazarus, there was only death ...

Do you remember a time when you grieved for one who was closest to you? A spouse, a parent, a child, a grandparent ... Living in that grief seems unbearable. The world seems to revolve around you with a shroud, as though you are wrapped in cotton and everything "out there" is distant and cloudy, even when it is right before you. It is difficult to concentrate. Food and drink seem superfluous. People speak words of comfort that seem to comfort only them. The days seem interminable as decisions are made, church services are set, family comes near, ... and then they all leave ... and you are left with a new way of living that is unsure and unqualified. Your whole sense of self-identity changes and you have to begin thinking, "how do I react to this now, how do I make these decisions now, now how do I ...?"

When death comes upon us it changes us, forever. Through death we are transformed. For some the transformation is painful and slow and seems to never end. For others, though, the transformation, while at first so difficult, becomes a thing of beauty and new life. Rather

than simply being “asleep with the dead”, new life is discovered and a greater sense of self-awareness and God-awareness can be revealed.

These deaths come to us in many forms. There is, of course, the physical death of one we love, or even our own death. But there is also the death that comes in broken relationships; in changes in lifestyle – chosen or forced upon us; in the loss or change of jobs; even in the ‘loss’ of children growing up and moving on ... Death can simply be the end of what we once knew and were intimately familiar with, leaving us unstable, with questions and doubts and fears.

But death no longer has the final say. It still has some say, but the final say.

The life that we are called to live, in Christ and with God, is not one that excludes death or runs away from it. Quite to the contrary, it is a life that recognizes that until we die to our old selves, until we die to our sin, we cannot truly be transformed into that new life that God has promised us in Jesus Christ. And part of that dying to the old ways is this path we take through the darkness that may indeed be the darkness of death, as we release what has always been, as we let go of all that we have held such a tight grasp on, that we might better be able to reach out through that death to take hold of the hand of Christ as he pulls us, through the cross, into that eternal and new life we are all searching madly for.

Our Lenten journey; our path to Jerusalem; our stop at the foot of the cross and our kneeling before the sealed tomb are all parts of our transformation through the death of our old selves and our rebirth into our new self in Christ’s glory and eternal hope.

We may, along this journey (whenever our personal Lenten season may happen) discover that we are like Martha and Mary, believing already that Jesus can do something about this death and despair we feel. We may, however, find that we are more like Lazarus – at best, believing that we are simply dead and there is nothing left; or at worst, believing that we have been left in the tomb with no hope. What we cannot escape is that there will be seasons in our lives when we are faced with these deaths, in many forms, that transform us and change us into the beings God has called us to become. Sometimes we will walk slowly forward in hope, but sometimes we may lose that hope completely. But it does not depend upon us ...

Lazarus did not actively try to resurrect and save himself. Mary and Martha did not try to pull Lazarus back out of that tomb. It was Jesus who, in his divine wisdom, made them wait for him to come to them in their grief; who shared with them in the grief of the moment – crying with them and not simply making the pain simply disappear – and *then, and only then*, did he call Lazarus to emerge from his tomb.

And in that process, in that mourning and grieving, and in that call to come out of the tomb, transformation was given to both the dead and those who grieved the dead.

It is not an easy truth to grapple with, but it is a truth nonetheless, that it is only through death that real transformation, real life can be received and lived. And so, I urge you, do not quit this Lenten journey now. We are so close to the empty tomb, but we still have the entrance into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, the trial and death of Jesus to endure. But when we do endure, we will also recognize the magnitude of the transformation that will come through Jesus’ death, which leads to new life for each of us – both in eternity but also right now.