

This Sunday's Readings – The 5th Sunday of Lent – The main theme of today's readings is death to life. This is also the last of the three "Scrutinies".

The first reading is from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, which was written sometime during or right after the Babylonian Captivity. Ezekiel began his career in Babylon around the year 593 BC and is the first to receive the call to prophesy outside the Holy Land. In this section, his message is one of hope. Jerusalem will rise again to greatness. The Lord will raise the people of Israel from their graves, but in a figurative sense. It must be remembered that the Jews did not believe in an afterlife. As Fr. Roger Karban explains in his weekly syndicated column from 1999 – "They know and anticipate only this earthly existence. A relationship with God doesn't "get them into heaven"; it simply adds to the quality of their everyday life. But there are some rare poetic breakthroughs during this time of limited faith, as we hear in Sunday's first reading (Ez 37:12-14)." Also as Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* further comments – "Rather, the language of this future hope is transferred to Israel's return from exile. It will be like resurrection from the grave. In this figurative resurrection God will bring his people to newness of life and put his Spirit within them. This two-level theme—the restoration of God's people and the eschatological resurrection of the dead— thus start hand in hand as they will continue through apocalyptic literature to the New Testament". Even though this section hints at resurrection, the term and the concept is not formally introduced until the Book of the Prophet Daniel, which is part of apocalyptic biblical literature. Daniel was written around the year 167. Resurrection was not universally embraced by all Jews, as is seen in today's Gospel from John.

In today's Gospel, we read the story of Jesus' raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead. This is the last of the "signs" in John's Gospel. Note that in John's Gospel Jesus performs signs while in the synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus performs miracles. A sign is a portent or indication of something to come, while a miracle is an extraordinary event. It is also interesting to note that this particular story is unique only to John. The other Gospel writers mention a Lazarus, but not in this context. The St. Charles Borromeo Bible Study of Picayune, MS, adds these facts about Lazarus and Mary – "The name "Lazarus" means "God has Helped" (Hebrew: *Eleazar*). The way the sacred author introduces the village, he expects us to know who Martha and Mary are (Luke 10:38-42 where Jesus is a guest and teaches in their house). The name today is El-Azariyeh (an Arabic corruption of the name Lazarus). It is less than two miles southeast of Jerusalem, separated from it by the Mount of Olives... There are a number of women in the Gospels who are called Mary. The Mary here is Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus, the woman who later anointed our Lord, again in Bethany, at the house of Simon the leper. "She was the one who anointed" expresses an action which occurred prior to the time of writing, but the anointing took place after the resurrection of Lazarus. Were Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and the "sinful" woman who anointed Jesus' feet in Galilee (Luke 7:36) one, two, or three women? It seems most likely that they are all different people. Due to the times, locations and details reported the anointings at Bethany and Galilee are believed to be two separate anointings. Nothing given about Mary Magdalene links her to the other two Marys". This story comes just before Jesus is arrested in Jerusalem and His subsequent death and resurrection. It was right after Jesus

performed this sign that the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas, the high priest, decided that Jesus must die. Martha, Lazarus' sister, proclaims her belief in the resurrection. In Jewish society, the Sadducees, who were the priestly class and always associated with the ruling class, did not believe in resurrection. The Pharisees, however, who believed in the ethnic and cultural purity of Judaism, did believe in resurrection. As in the first reading, there is the message of hope. Our Lord is with us always even in our darkest hour when we feel so alone. We must have faith. As Jesus said - "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die". This is also a story in which we see Jesus' humanity. He wept for his friend Lazarus.

However, there is much more to this "sign" than meets the eye. Fr. Roger Karban, in his weekly syndicated column from 2002, explains - "Many Scripture readers don't understand the difference between resuscitation and resurrection. When biblical people are brought back to life after dying, they're almost always resuscitated, not resurrected. Resuscitation presumes the individual was dead, and now lives. But the person brought back to life is the same person who died. Our four evangelists presume the same about the daughter of Jairus, the widow of Naim's son, and Lazarus, the man Jesus loved. Though the events which brought the three back to life anticipate and symbolize real resurrection for Jesus and his followers, they're simply resuscitations. None of the three is alive today. The person truly raised never dies again. Not only does he or she live forever, they're not quite the same person after their resurrection as they were before their death. The only biblical person who rises from the dead is Jesus. In our Lazarus pericope, Martha expresses the "old" theology, Jesus, the "new." "I know he (Lazarus) will rise, in the resurrection on the last day," Martha states. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus proclaims, "those who believe in me, even if they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." John eventually has Jesus resuscitate Lazarus, demonstrating his belief that those who believe in Jesus have already stepped over the line into eternity. Though they still live in this world, they've begun crossing the threshold into the next".

Finally, we must also understand John's community in 95 AD. As John J. Pilch explains in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* explains - "A recent flight across the Atlantic was enlivened by reading an article in the Journal of the Royal College of Physicians. A physician and his theologian wife argued that from a medical perspective, Jesus did not die and rise from the dead. He merely collapsed and was resuscitated. Though these authors did not extend their hypothesis further, others have said the same about Lazarus. The often helpful insights of modern medical science forget that the story of the raising of Lazarus is a "sign" in John's Gospel and not the medical notes of a coroner. In John's Gospel, there are seven "signs" that are primarily intended to stir faith in Jesus (2:11). Sometimes they do the very opposite (11:47-48).

LIFE AT TWO LEVELS

According to the story, Lazarus has died. Martha and others believe that had he arrived on time, Jesus might have prevented Lazarus' death or raised him up immediately. As

John writes this story for his community, Martha represents that grieving community in asking the perennial question: "If Jesus gave us eternal life, why are believers still dying?" John's story offers a challenging response.

JOHN'S COMMUNITY

Like other New Testament communities, that of John experienced a great crisis of faith when any believer died. If Jesus gave us eternal life, why must we still die? The evangelist therefore has added symbolic interpretations to this story of the death of Lazarus, the faithful disciple whom Jesus loved (11:5,36). Martha represents the community with its real but inadequate faith: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." If only Jesus had not left at his ascension, he would still be with the community and believers wouldn't die. After all, whatever Jesus asks of the Father will be given, won't it? (v. 22). John's Jesus must correct this misunderstanding. He is indeed "the resurrection and the life" (v. 24). But resurrection does not mean the restoration of life to a corpse, it entails rather a transformation of life. Moreover, the eternal life that Jesus gives his followers does not abolish death but rather transcends it. To continue to believe this firmly is the challenge posed to the survivors by each believer's death. Through Martha, Jesus addresses believers of all times: "Do you believe this?" Her perfect answer ought to echo through the ages: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Faith in the risen Jesus is not fully developed until it enables a believer to face physical death with the firm confidence that the present possession of eternal life is not simply a pledge of resurrection on the last day but is rather a present and continuing participation in the life of the ever-living Jesus now, at this moment. Those who believe in Jesus never truly die. What scientifically minded Western believers must recognize in the story of Lazarus is that Martha pronounces her confession of faith as a response to Jesus who reveals himself as the resurrection and the life. Her faith does not depend upon or flow from seeing her brother raised from the dead. Proof begets knowledge; faith does not rest on proof. The insights of our prescientific Mediterranean ancestors in the faith are like Hamlet's humbling comment: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy [or science]" (*Hamlet*, act 1, scene 6, line 167)".

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