

2020 A 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent March 29

As we are in our national and global coronavirus situation, we must not lose faith in the goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ who loves us. Our life is with him, our eternal life is already planted within us by grace. We remain firmly in his loving hands and nothing can snatch us from him.

Let us remember St. Paul's words written during his time of great trial: "**What can separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or peril ... In all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loves us.**"

When the famous agnostic Robert Ingersoll died, the printed funeral program left this instruction, "**There will be no singing.**"

Only few feel like singing in the face of death. The rest: running perhaps, crying probably. But singing? Not at death. Death steals our reason to sing. Of course, death takes the songs from our lips and leaves in their place stilled tongues and tear-flooded cheeks.

There was no singing when Jesus went to see Martha and Mary's house after their brother Lazarus died. Mourning, weeping. But no singing.

I buried a fine young man of 21-years old who died in auto accident some years ago. I still remember the eyes that met me at the door, of his parents and two younger sisters. The family was held hostage by the answerless questions. Taken captive by sadness, they couldn't take few steps without walking into a brick wall of disbelief. It was enough to make you cry.

It is enough to make God cry. Jesus' throat tightened as he walked among the inmates. He gazed at the chalky faces through watery eyes. How long would they listen to Satan's lie? How long would they be in bondage? What would he have to do to convince them? Hadn't he proven it at Nain? Was the raising of Jairus' daughter not a proof enough? How long will these people lock themselves into man-made prison of fear? He had shown them the key that unlocks their door.

**"I am the resurrection and life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live,"** Jesus said, "Show me the tomb."

They led him to the burial place of Lazarus. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. Over the stone was spun the spiderweb of finality. **"No more!"** the stone boasted. "No more shall his hands move. No longer his tongue speaks. No more!"

Jesus wept. He wept not for the dead but for the living. He wept not for the one in the cave of death but for those in the cave of fear. He wept for those who, though alive, were dead. He wept for those who, though free, were prisoners, held captive by their fear of death.

**“Move the stone.”** The command was soft but firm. “But, Jesus, it will ... it will stink.”

**“Move the stone so you will see God.”**

Stones have never stood in God’s way. They didn’t in Bethany two thousand years ago. And they didn’t in Europe about a hundred years ago. She was a Hanoverian Countess. She was known for her disbelief in God and her conviction that no one could call life from a tomb.

Before her death, she left specific instructions that her tomb was to be sealed with a slab of granite and stone blocks around and the corners of blocks to be fastened together to the granite by heavy iron clamps with an inscription: *“This burial place,/ purchased to all eternity,/ must never be opened.”*

The countess had insured that her tomb would as a mockery to the belief in the resurrection. A small birch tree, however, had other plans. Its root found its way between the slabs and grew deep into the ground. Over the years it forced its way until the iron clamps popped loose and the granite slab was raised. The stone cover is now resting against the trunk of the birch. The boastful epitaph permanently silenced by the work of a determined tree ... or a powerful God.

**“Lazarus, come out!”** It took only one call. Lazarus heard his name. His eyes opened beneath the wrap. The cloth covered hands raised. Knees lifted, feet touched the ground, and the dead man came out. **“Take the grave cloths off of him and let him go.”**

Jesus saw people enslaved by their fear of a cheap power. He explained and showed that the tomb’s slab was nothing to fear. The people wouldn’t believe him. He touched a boy and called him back to life. The followers were still unconvinced. He whispered life into the dead body of a girl. The people were still cynical. He let the dead man spend four days in the grave and then called him out. Isn’t that enough?

Apparently not enough. For **it was necessary for him to die and enter the tomb, to submerge in the darkness of death before people would believe that death had been conquered.** And after he did, after he came out on the other side of death, it was time to sing ... it was time to celebrate.

Be assured of my prayers for all of you and please pray for me.