

Fifth Sunday of Lent Cycle C (Scrutinies)
Ez 37:12-14; Rom 8:8-11; Jn 11:1-45
March 26, 2023

Gary was in his early 60's. He was a man who worked hard and played hard. For almost his entire career he worked for GE and built jet engines—he knew everything there was to know about them. He was devoted to his wife Debi, loved animals, and was sort of a dog-whisperer with his pet Dobermans. He loved working on cars, drinking beer, and hanging out around a picnic table with the whole family.

He had been having some stomach trouble, but didn't think much of it. It was only at his wife's insistence that he finally went to a doctor. "It's some kind of infection," he was told, but weeks passed and nothing changed. And for the first time the word "cancer" was mentioned. When surgery was finally done, they simply closed him up. What was once a very treatable condition had gone too far. Suddenly, Gary's only option, his only hope, was time—enough time to be with Debi, his family; enough time to get ready to die.

Soon after, Gary's younger brother-in-law died unexpectedly. When the family gathered for the funeral, Gary and Debi sat together as close as two people could get. They held on to each other with the words of the hymns ringing in their ears. Gary knew he would be next; that the next time the family gathered it would be for his funeral. Gary died just six weeks later.

Lazarus was in his thirties when he was stricken with a life-threatening illness. He was a young man and a close friend of Jesus.

Jesus could have moved quickly to help him; he could have saved his life. But he didn't. Jesus arrived late—he missed the funeral by four days.

It was over, Lazarus' soul had given up and he was gone. There was no hope; just decay and stench. Lazarus was really dead.

"Lord, if you had only been here my brother would not have died! What if you had been here when we first called you?"

You can almost feel the pain in Martha's voice, and there's a tinge of rebuke and blame in her words. "Where were you when I needed you Jesus? You took your sweet time in getting here." Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise, but Martha wants her brother back now. Jesus tells her:

“I am the resurrection and the life. If you believe in me, even if you die, you will live. Do you believe this?” And as much as Martha trusts in Jesus, as many times as she had seen him work miracles, she’s just unable to come to full belief. Death has a way of shaking our faith—it can overwhelm us and even suffocate us.

“Do you believe this?” The most profound question, the one that brings everyone to silence. The question that asks for the ultimate confession of faith.

Death is always untimely. It comes crashing headlong into our lives and into our families. And we can be filled with so much grief and anger that we just want to scream at the top of our lungs at everyone around us: “Don’t you realize what happened? Somebody I love very much has died, a part of me has been taken away forever, and I don’t know how I can go on.” And all the questions that ring deafeningly in our ears over and over. “What if?” “What if I had made him go to the doctor sooner?” “What if I hadn’t left her alone?” “What if I hadn’t have shrugged it off so easily?”

Many of us have been there standing at the grave. We follow the pallbearers and watch as the casket is placed on a metal frame that sits over the grave.

We hardly notice the pile of soil mounded to the side covered with a green tarp. There’s a tent canopy to shield us from the weather and a row of chairs lined-up on one side of the grave.

We, like Martha and Mary, find ourselves in the cemetery among the markers and monuments—the last stopping off point on our journey to God. And we hear those same words echoing from the Bethany graveyard, “I am the resurrection and life.” It is then that we are asked, “Do you believe this?”

Jesus stands at the grave of his friend staring at the stone that had been rolled into place to seal the entrance. He knew that he’d be next to die and placed in a rock-hewn tomb of his own. As he takes a few steps closer, the cries of the mourners come to a quick silence. And in a thundering voice that sent shivers down the spines of everyone, Jesus shouts at the top of his lungs, “Lazarus, come out!” And he who had been a corpse is now a living, breathing human being.

He who had been bound from neck to feet, shuffles and staggers like one whose feet were shackled, dragging his death linens behind him. And everyone who had long given up on Lazarus now stands in horror and awe. And Jesus turns to them, to all of them who had lost trust and faith and says, “Now do you believe this?”

Death is the ultimate challenge of faith. We pray for health. We pray for long life. And we wonder why some die young and others live long full lives. We struggle with the cruel realities of life and we watch in pain as a young parent battles cancer and how death indiscriminately chooses one and misses another. We struggle to make sense out of it all. But . . . we all die. And Jesus stands at our graves, just as he once stood at Lazarus' grave, continuing to declare, "I am the resurrection and the life." And he waits for each of us to respond.

Today, in many parishes marks the third and final scrutiny for the elect. They made a choice—as we all once made a choice—to affirm our faith in Jesus.

Their journey is nearing its end and today is a great occasion for us to give them one last measure of encouragement and support.

Soon they will be plunged into the baptismal waters leading to new life standing in the face of impending death. And with the entire assembly they will proclaim with Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and previous naysayers, "Yes, Lord, we do believe that you are the resurrection and the life."

- Fr. Stephen Lattner, O.S.B.