

This Sunday's gospel, John 11: 1-45, is the powerful story of Jesus raising one of his best friends, Lazarus, from the grave. We don't know what the illness was, or how long he had been sick. All we know is that his sisters, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus that their beloved brother was ill.

The story unfolds in a rather strange way. Jesus' journey to Bethany is interrupted for two days for an unknown reason. He is cautioned that going to Judea could be at his own risk, since there were people there who want to stone him.

When he finally arrives, Martha meets him on the road and lets him know that Lazarus has died. A heart-felt conversation between Martha and Jesus culminates with Martha's act of faith: "I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."

Martha sends for Mary. They and a few others join them at the tomb. Jesus shows his deep feeling for his friend Lazarus. "And Jesus wept."

Jesus orders the tomb opened. He raises his eyes to the Father and prays. Then cries out in a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out!" Slowly his friend walks out of the tomb. He must have looked like an Egyptian mummy.

Jesus final order is "Untie him and let him go."

The story and imagery of this Sunday's gospel is intriguing with many aspects to reflect upon.

One lens of interpretation is that of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. This gospel corresponds to the Third Scrutiny for those preparing for baptism. A scrutiny is a ritual that is meant to help enlighten the candidate of areas of personal and spiritual conversion.

Two Sundays ago the gospel related the story of the Woman at the Well. She comes to believe that Jesus is the true "living water." Her personal conversion was so powerful that she could wait to tell the citizens of the community about her encounter with Jesus.

Last Sunday's gospel described Jesus' healing the man born blind. If we want to live the fullness of life, we need to follow the vision of Jesus.

Today's gospel can help us reflect on the ways we may be "bound up" in our own selfish ways. It is only through our encounter with Jesus that we can be untied from them and set free.

As I write this reflection on Friday the 27th, I am in the third day of my two week self-quarantine. I wasn't feeling well the first part of the week, so I thought it would be good to get "tested." I don't have strep or the regular flu, which is what the screen test

resolves. But I was still told that I needed to stay at home for 14 days. If things got worse, then call in for an actual COVID-19 test at a hospital. This procedure is due to the lack of the test kits.

With so many people in the world coping with the virus, especially the families of loved ones who have died, this isolation made me think of the symbolism of Lazarus in the tomb. This world-wide pandemic continues to spread. We see stories that continue to unfold on the news.

The wrappings around Lazarus in the tomb, to me, is a powerful image of people being “wound up” in themselves, especially with those who seemingly do not care about others contracting the virus. We probably saw stories of the crowded beaches in Florida and interviews with those who think the pandemic is “fake news.” They fail to see the light of truth because they are so wrapped up in themselves. Their foolishness is deadly.

On the other hand, while in my own tomb of quarantine, I think of others who are taking the pandemic seriously. They are self-isolating themselves for the good of their families, their neighbors and their communities. Their concern is life-giving!

I think of the countless medical workers who are caring for those infected with the virus. They are in the tomb, too, as agents of humanity and truth. Their giftedness is life-giving!

I think of those who are delivering food to grocery stores, those checking on their neighbors, making appropriate connections with family and loved ones who might feel isolated. Their work is life-giving!

I bet you can think of other examples of people being bound up in themselves. But more importantly, those who are reaching out to others with compassion and service. They are the ones who echo the voice of Jesus: “Untie him, and let him go!”

Our journey of Lent leads us today to the tomb. Those who long for baptism are preparing to participate in Jesus’ death and burial with him in the tomb. They know that their sins will be forgiven through the blood of the Lamb on the cross. They look forward to be reborn in Jesus as the tomb becomes a womb of new life. This is the heart of Jesus’ Paschal Mystery.

The COVID-19 pandemic will eventually end. Hopefully, the world will embrace the lessons learned about life, truth, compassion and faith. And whenever we are faced with what looks like a tomb, may we also recognize there is always a womb.