

5th Sunday of Lent 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church
Fr. Michael Renninger

We were sitting at the table in South Philadelphia, playing poker with the neighborhood ladies.

Rita Gangemi brought the pizzelles. Tessie Canalichio made the coffee. Ida Profetta made cream puffs. I just ate everything.

In the midst of the banter and laughter, Tessie lowered her voice and said with all seriousness: “Did you hear about Rocco Gandolfi?” The other ladies just shook their heads. So Tessie said, “He went to da movies!”

Now, I was waiting for the rest of the story. Which movie? Did he like it?

But Ida made the sign of the cross and said, “I can’t believe it.”

I said, “What are you talking about?”

And Tessie replied, “You *know*. He ‘went to da movies.’ He turned in social security card.”

I was still confused. So Tessie whispered... “He *died*.”

I blurted out, “Why didn’t you just say so?” And Tessie said, “Oh, you can’t talk about death. *It’s not nice!*”

Now, frankly, I grew up on a farm. I watched my grandmother grab a chicken, kill it, clean it and serve it for supper. From an early age, I understood – death is part of life.

And if somebody died, my parents said, “He died.” The obituaries said, “She died.” Everyone understood – I will die. We will die. It is a part of life.

But have you noticed how our culture is working to make sure that we don’t talk about what’s real any more?

In South Philly, you couldn’t say, “Mr. Gandolfi died.” You said, “He went to the movies.”

I read obituaries, and I’ve noticed that we try to avoid saying the word “death” even in an obituary!

In recent obituaries, families don't want to say that someone has died. So they say:

- + he passed away
- + She passed peacefully into the arms of her savior
- + he went home to be with Jesus.

Or they say:

- + he crossed the River Jordan
- + she joined the heavenly choir

Or, my favorites:

- + he will be smelling flowers from underneath
- + she put on her jeweled boots and joined that last roundup in the sky
- + he won't be counted in the next census.

We don't seem ready to deal with death any more. So, when someone dies, their loved often work very hard to avoid naming what's real. Perhaps we do that so we don't have to deal with the fact that it is going to happen to us too. Instead, we smile and 'go to da movies...'

But in today's Gospel, no one is pretending. Everyone knows: Lazarus is dead. Dead as a doornail. Dead four days.

No one is pretending. Mary and Martha don't tell Jesus or the neighbors, "Lazarus went to the movies."

These are people who know that death is a part of life. They are weeping. They are mourning. And they are being honest. Could there be anything *more* honest than what Martha says to Jesus in verse 39? "Lord, he's been dead for four days, so there will be a stench." Or, in the amazing translation of the King James version, "Lord, he stinketh."

He stinketh. And death stinketh. Because, my friends, it's *real*. And it is something we will all *experience*. No amount of pretending or word play will alter that reality. No amount of Obamacare or Trumpcare will let you avoid your *final* diagnosis. We are mortal. We will die. That is my future.

Mary, Martha and their neighbors experience the appropriate sadness and grief which happens when death invades our daily living. Lazarus, their brother, Jesus' friend, is in the tomb. Jesus didn't come when they called. Mary and Martha speak from their hearts: "Lord, if you had been

here....” Jesus weeps. The neighbors grumble, “He healed the blind man, why couldn’t he have saved Lazarus?”

Don’t overlook that last statement from the neighbors. “He healed the blind man, why couldn’t he heal Lazarus?”

Remember the blind man? We heard about *his* healing in last week’s Gospel. And remember the week *before*? We heard about the Woman at the Well, and how Jesus helped her to experience hope and healing despite her past.

For approximately 1700 years, Catholics have listened to these three stories from John’s Gospel during this part of Lent. On one hand, these events were seen as vital lessons for the adults who were preparing for baptism.

The candidates for baptism were assured that Christ would forgive the sins of their past – just like he forgave the woman at the well. The candidates were assured that Christ would heal the wounds of their present and give them faith – just as he healed the man born blind. And the candidates were assured that Christ would raise them from the dead – just as he raised Lazarus.

But these readings are not just for those preparing for baptism - they are for all of us who are already baptized. So many of us are struggling, and we are not sure where to turn, and we don’t know who to trust. Our culture tells us to just keep pretending. But Christians deal with what’s real.

These three Gospel passages tell us the truth we need to know: *Christ has forgiven our past, Christ can heal our present, and Christ will be with us in the future, even when our future takes us to the tomb.*

How does Jesus tell us this truth in these three Gospel passages?

First, he’s telling us that his love is more powerful than anything which has happened in our past. The woman at the well was burdened by the complexity of her past. Five husbands. Now living with a man who was not her husband. Outcast in a society which judged harshly. Could her past be forgiven?

And in effect, Jesus says: “Trust me. God’s love has already overcome your past. God’s love has already forgiven. God’s love can heal whatever still hurts. Your past is in my loving hands.”

Secondly, Jesus tells us that his love is more powerful than anything which is hurting us in the present. The man born blind was literally encased in darkness. Everyone agreed, there was no

hope for him.

And in effect Jesus says, “Trust me. God’s love is already overcoming your present pain. God is at work healing what seems hopeless. God’s light is shining in whatever feels dark in you. Right now. Your *present* is in my loving hands.”

Thirdly - Jesus, who always speaks what is real, says to us: “Trust me. God’s love is already in your future. God is working out his purpose. God will walk every step with you. So be not afraid.”

Like Lazarus, *you will die*. Like every human being who has ever lived, *you will die*. Like every human being, there is a tomb in your future.

But Jesus says: “trust me... I am already in *that* tomb, because I’ve already been in *my own* tomb. And I am there so that you will know the crucial truth: *your future is in my loving hands*. And your future does not end when you are dead and buried. The Love of God is already in your future. And your future is full of hope, even though you have to walk through the tomb in order to get there.”

The Jesus who called Lazarus by name, “come out,” come to life, is already in your future, and he is calling *you* by name. “Come to me. Come and live.”

Lazarus is dead. He stinketh. And now he lives. He liveth.

Who else can do the same thing for you? What else can make that same promise?

Death is real. But so is resurrection. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Do you believe him?

If you do, then you can know the power of his love to unburden your past, heal your present, and lead you to life in the future.

You can find life and love by listening to his voice. Or you can keep avoiding the truth, by going da the movies.